

Semantics acceptance via the enterprise

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I'm headed to the Semantic Technology conference in a couple of weeks, primed to mingle with the top minds in what is arguably the most exciting sector in technology right now. I'll be participating in a panel, "Taking Semantic Technology to the Masses," that tackles a key issue around the semantic Web. How do we take semantics to the next level? How do we extricate ourselves from the convoluted morass of geek-speak to make semantic technology understandable and appealing to consumers?

We'll dig deeper into the issue at SemTech but I think the broad answer is very simple: remove "semantics" from the equation. I tackled this issue a few months ago, making the point that

...the ultimate solution will likely evolve quietly, organically, behind the scenes of a seemingly run-of-the-mill software app. We'll raise our heads from our keyboards one day and find that the words we're typing have taken on a life of their own.

I was reminded of these words recently when I spoke with Semantra, a Texas company that enables employees to conversationally interact with business software. Founded by semantics pioneer Marvin Elder, Semantra allows users, techie and non-techie alike, to easily pull needed information from complex relational databases within an organization. Semantra believes that, while the analytics tools designed for businesses do the job quite nicely, the only people in a company who really know how to use them are in IT. So the company built software that embeds into existing enterprise applications, allowing users across an organization to access what they need, when they need it, in their own natural language. Semantra works directly with systems integrators and resellers to enable application functionality and recently announced integration with Microsoft Dynamics CRM. Conversations with other major software players are in progress.

The software looked impressive in the demos I saw but what really interests me about Semantra is its approach. The company didn't set out to "bring semantics to the enterprise"; it simply wants to make business software easier and smarter for every employee, no matter their technical expertise. In fact, CEO Chris Davis specifically expressed a lack of interest in targeting the mass consumer, his opinion being that "the reality of presenting semantics to the general public is a tall order." I certainly won't dispute that point but I think Semantra is doing just that, albeit in a roundabout way.

Say you're in sales and spend all day seamlessly interacting and discovering information in programs you didn't previously know how to navigate, databases that were previously unreachable to you without knowing command prompts, all via the Semantra functionality. After a while, wouldn't you begin to expect, even demand such intelligence from other applications in your life? Wouldn't you be more open to new approaches toward a smarter Web? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But not all innovative technology starts out as a free service employed by the blogosphere. Sometimes, best practices within the enterprise filter out into our daily lives. The roads toward acceptance of semantic applications are multiple and varied. Companies like Semantra - that have developed a semantics approach to business without selling it as "semantics" - are forging a path we should watch closely.



Semantra Inquiry Assistance provides suggestions based on what has been entered.



Results are displayed on screen and available for export to other programs.