Context for Action: People, Processes, and Information

TheBrain Enterprise Knowledge Platform October 2001

Having 20 windows open on your desktop doesn't allow you to work more effectively with the information. It doesn't create obvious bonds between the processes that underlay the information. Can someone looking over your shoulder appreciate what process you are involved in by glancing at your desktop? Is the desktop reflective? Unlikely. The process is still principally in the gray matter. It's not in the corporate memory. This is an information-centric view of the world. It is not a process-centric view of the world, and process centric is what we should be striving for.

→ Thomas Koulopoulos, Delphi Group {1996}

Building a Better Desktop

The passage above is unfortunately just as true today as it was when it was written five years ago—most of us are still, by and large, prisoners of an information-centric view of the world. Today's graphical user interfaces (GUIs) grew out of the need for a single metaphor to access multiple applications, basic data sharing facilities, and control panel conventions across differing information systems. Instead of being reflective of the processes employed by modern knowledge workers, though, the predominant "windows" GUI only reflects "stovepipes" of mutually unintelligible applications and data repositories. Simply placing two (or twenty) windows together on your desktop creates proximity—but no relationship. Recently, however, forward-thinking information architects have experimented with alternative metaphors for organizing the desktop (and, by corollary, for organizing workers' relationships to both knowledge and business process). One of the more intuitively compelling of these is TheBrain.

TheBrain

The metaphor here is obvious, and apt: TheBrain is a visual user interface that enables a network of connections between information. The interface represents information as words called "thoughts" in a diagram that uses lines called "links" to indicate interrelationships. Fundamentally different from a hierarchical folder system that separates information into smaller and smaller groups, TheBrain allows any piece of information to be linked to any other, just as thoughts are linked in the human brain. TheBrain was originally developed by TheBrain Technologies as PersonalBrain, a downloadable information integration system. Although PersonalBrain is still available, the company is now focusing its efforts on its new Enterprise Knowledge Platform. This platform combines a knowledge-supporting enterprise architecture with TheBrain's inherent ability to connect people to information.

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BrainEKP Highlights:

BrainEKP links disparate data sources into a collaborative workplace accessible through a dynamic, visual interface

Visual User Interface is fundamentally different from a conventional hierarchy of folders. Instead of separating information into smaller and smaller groups, TheBrain connects information into a network of related items. Any piece of information can be linked to any other, providing immediate access from multiple locations, and allowing people to access information, share understanding, and communicate effectively

Universal Data Access is rendered via BrainEKP connectors that allow the incorporation of virtually any data source. Connectors talk to information repositories and tell BrainEKP what relationships exist in the repository

Knowledge Model describes the way people work and serves as a business process template or mold for information and resources

Integrated Collaboration enables people to communicate with each other in the same place where they create and access information. Communication in context eliminates redundant efforts to organize information once for access, and a second time to share thoughts and ideas

BrainEKP

TheBrain's Enterprise Knowledge Platform provides a single interface designed to connect people, processes and information across the enterprise. To that end, BrainEKP's architecture is based on J2EE technology running on application servers to deliver enterprise-class interoperability. The platform includes four primary components: Universal Data Access, Integrated Collaboration, Knowledge Model, and Visual User Interface. Universal Data Access is rendered via BrainEKP Connectors, which "talk to" relational databases, enterprise applications, and file and document management systems. Connectors inform BrainEKP about the relationships that exist in these disparate repositories, and allow any piece of information to be visually mapped to any other item—including items in separate sources. This provides a kind of "visual enterprise application integration" via a consistent interface that allows end users to access connected information in a source-agnostic way.

BrainEKP's Integrated Collaboration component places collaboration where it belongs—in the same place users create and access information, and within the context of business process. As users collaborate on a process, they create additional links, share summaries of topics in notes, and exchange comments. Documents, spreadsheets, files and Web links can be attached to support the context surrounding a particular concept. The platform's Knowledge Model is essentially a business process modeling tool. The organization's established processes are first analyzed and broken down by types of information, relationships, and steps. The resulting model represented, of course, via BrainEKP's standard visual interface—describes the way people work and serves as a business process template. Again leveraging the platform's Universal Data Access capabilities, knowledge workers use existing information resources to fill in process templates with specific details. Process steps and corresponding knowledge are thereby captured in a sort of process library, which adds to a people-driven knowledge base.

Last—but definitely not least—the Visual User Interface presents users with all relevant information, regardless of source. Essentially, the original PersonalBrain interface has been adapted to serve as the user interface for the entire BrainEKP platform. With this tool, the critical relationships between people, process and information that generate actionable context in the enterprise become visible. And, significantly, users contribute to that "actionable context"—which, by the way, is not a bad definition of knowledge—by the very act of doing work.

The Bottom Line

Perhaps the most significant differentiator of BrainEKP is that the "brain" metaphor that drives the interface—with all of its rich connotations of connectivity—*also informs the architecture of the platform itself.* So when a knowledge worker modifies a process or creates a relationship between two key business concepts, the entire system benefits organically. BrainEKP represents an important new approach to building the knowledge-driven enterprise. \gtrsim



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