

A blurred background image of a modern office hallway with glass walls and a person walking in the distance. A dark blue horizontal band is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the title text.

Letting Your Imagination Loose

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With the proliferation of web-based cash management products and services, many of the factors that once combined to differentiate one bank from the next – the ability to initiate cross-border payments, for example – are no longer given as much prominence as in the past. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for corporate treasurers to tell one bank's offering apart from the next. Traditional transaction-based products are being re-shaped by clients seeking cash management solutions that mimic the same level of usability, personalization and flexibility found in everyday online experiences and common software programs.

The introduction of Web 2.0 and other technologies for enabling user-driven experiences are becoming more prevalent in bank-provided cash management offerings, particularly as the influence of "Generation Y" grows within banks and financial service providers. For banks, successfully adapting to this new market landscape requires not only leveraging their expertise in a consultative manner, but also re-thinking their approach to cash management products and services, and the user experience.

The Changing Perception Of Corporate Treasury

There is little doubt that given the difficult economic environment and general global nature of business the role of the corporate treasurer has changed dramatically. While always an important position, the role is increasingly viewed as more strategic. It is a changing perception echoed in the results of a recent corporate treasury survey in which 85% of senior financial executives stated that their job had become more strategic within the last year.

Given the more strategic light into which treasurers have been cast, banks must similarly shift their focus away from transactions and into the realm of information. Treasurers are desperate for a window into global cash balances and information essential to their business. By owning the user experience, banks can create similar functionality and foster usability in a consistent way across all aspects of client interaction. With a 'building blocks' approach for establishing the requisite best-of-breed functionality, banks can dictate which specific elements of functionality will be used for each solution.

When you were a child, did you ever spend time letting your imagination loose with a set of LEGO? Even though most sets included a booklet with step-by-step instructions for building a car, boat or truck, the end result was always defined by the user. As the manufacturer, LEGO provided blocks that interconnected with one another and the expertise on which they could all come together to form a desired result. It was the child's imagination that did the rest.

While today's corporate clients are not letting their imagination loose in quite the same manner as a child may have with LEGO, they are increasingly pushing their banking partners for customizable dashboards and screen views that present information that is not only important to them, but in some cases may be unique to their role or business. In an era where some services often look and feel the same, banks that successfully differentiate themselves from their competitors will own the user experience.

A Radically Different User Experience

Owning the user experience means putting into action technology concepts that have been part of the broader discussion for some time now; service-oriented architecture (SOA), web services, portlets. Historically speaking, banks have always taken a more conservative, pragmatic approach to technology.

Given the level of sophistication and security required for cash management systems, it has been an appropriate approach. But the technology underpinning web-based cash management systems has continued to mature, and we have entered a time when leveraging advanced concepts such as SOA can no longer be classified as 'cutting edge'.

In the past, the ability of banks to offer a personalized user experience on a per-client basis was only as flexible as the technology platform. While most platforms offered banks the ability to incorporate logos and specific color schemes, other elements such as menus and viewable data were fairly fixed. Today, however, the boundaries of what a bank can offer a corporate client by leveraging solutions architected using SOA and web services is radically different.

Common approaches to owning the user experience to date have focused on either centralizing the application business logic or building the business logic into the user interface. These paths, however, result in the creation of either very complex web services contracts or the replication of business logic, thereby marginalizing the value. Rather, banks should view a SOA user interface components as a series of building blocks that corporate clients can orchestrate in the manner that best suits their requirements.

One of the areas in which banks are exploring new opportunities is through vertical market payment strategies. There a number of vertical industries such as healthcare, for example, in which treasury services and payment processes are exceedingly complex. For banks, this type of scenario offers a tremendous opportunity for value-added services; services that break down those inherent complexities and place the information users require at their fingertips. In order to successfully deliver such services, however, banks have to be able to own the user experience. Given the complexity associated with healthcare payments, any other approach to bringing products and services to market would likely prove unsuccessful.

A Mechanism For Growth

Within the banking community, the user interface has quickly become what the branch used to be. Corporate treasurers no longer make decisions about which bank to partner with based on just the proximity of the nearest branch or the breadth of services offered. Today, these decisions are increasingly based on criteria that evolve around the end user experience. A higher value, for example, is being placed on the number of clicks required to attain specific payment information than the ability to consolidate multiple payments into a single bulk payment. In order to maintain, and ultimately grow their corporate customer base banks must shift their focus from transaction-based services to brand identity, and the primary vehicle through which they can achieve that objective is by delivering highly customizable cash management products.