

Cost Would Mute the Effect of XML Standards for Emergency Workers

A new OASIS committee will define standards to enable information exchange between local, state and federal agencies. But financial woes will limit any impact from the initiative to the long term.

Event: On 10 February 2003, the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS) announced the OASIS Emergency Management Technical Committee. Its members will develop XML-based standards for emergency management, incident preparedness and response. The standards would enable information exchange between local, state and federal agencies, including law enforcement, medical professionals, companies, and other responders to natural and man-made disasters and emergencies.

First Take: Although establishing XML standards would facilitate the exchange of information between many disparate agencies, the wide scope of the effort probably will make it impractical. Even if the committee succeeds in establishing standards, it will address only part of the problem. The real hindrance to communication between government agencies is economic pressure. Cash-strapped local governments run on very limited IT budgets. The financial crisis among state governments has exacerbated the problem. Federal homeland security funding may spur some interoperability projects, but large IT projects at the local level will be limited. For now, *operations* have become more of an immediate problem than interoperability.

In addition, complete interoperability is somewhat unworkable. Emergency systems do not interoperate for a number of reasons — primarily, limited network connectivity. Such systems frequently carry information of a sensitive or private nature, and therefore must run on secure private networks. These networks should not depend on, or even frequently connect with, the Internet. If they did, they could face malicious cyberattacks or inadvertent risk through the negligence of users.

With vendors struggling with the same tight IT market, they may use the ideal of interoperability as a way to penetrate the emergency services market. Many hope to tap into well-funded homeland security initiatives. However, the OASIS initiative will not afford them any short-term gains and may have only a limited, long-term impact.

Enterprises and vendors should monitor the Emergency Management Technical Committee's efforts and evaluate the specifications that it develops — if any. Homeland security technology managers working on interoperability projects should not delay work while waiting for the development of specifications.

Analytical Source: Rich Mogull, Gartner Research

Recommended Reading and Related Research

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- “Take a Measured Approach to Homeland Security” — Homeland security requires enterprises to identify real threats and to proportion their efforts to meet them. **By James Lundy and French Caldwell**
- “Here’s What’s Wrong With XML-Defined Standards” — The large number of XML specifications for particular domains creates chaos for enterprises. **By Rita Knox**

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