



IBM Rational's Atlantic release – more of a bridge than an open divide

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Expert advice



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Can any product with such a grand name ever really live up to the hype? Atlantic, announced in October 2004, is the next version of IBM's software development platform product due out by the end of the year. However, is it the mighty ocean of a product that its name implies? Bola Rotibi explores the depth of the release.

Atlantic sees the introduction of new modules to the development platform, repackaging, restructuring and renaming of old modules, and generally a reaffirmation of IBM's credentials in the software development arena. In one sense it relates very well to that great expanse of ocean bearing the same name. Like the ocean, IBM's Atlantic release is deep, broad, varied and complex in nature. Without guidance it can be tricky to navigate for the uninitiated and the inexperienced. However, unlike the ocean, it provides a bridge between business and IT, rather than a barrier between continents.

Atlantic under the surface

The most significant feature of the release is the central role that Eclipse plays as the core platform upon which all the components are built, extended and integrated. IBM has reaffirmed its commitment to the development environment that it released to the community by using it as the foundation for all its tooling. Having a common platform, interface and integration framework certainly gives credence to the company's claim of being able to implement deep integration. Eclipse provides an open standards-based framework that has, and continues to attract, widespread support from many of the key best-of-breed ISVs, making it easier for customers to retain their existing investment in software tools and an obvious choice on which to standardise.

IBM has also gone to some effort to simplify and streamline its development tools portfolio. In particular, the company has made each new or repackaged component more easily identifiable with the appropriateness of the different roles involved in executing a development project. Previously, architects would have been served by the Rational Rose XDE family; now they are served by Rational Software Architect. Developers had to contend with a number of different products such as the WebSphere Studio Family or the Rational Rose XDE Developer for Java. These have now been restructured to Rational Application Developer and Rational Web Developer, making their usage and functionality much clearer. A similar simplification has been directed at the testing tools with the new Rational Functional and Manual Tester and the Rational Performance Tester.



Ticking the right development boxes

The Atlantic release offers a powerful platform through which IBM is attempting to address all skill levels and all roles associated with executing a software development project. The solution is of the class and quality that one comes to expect from IBM, given the company's diverse operations, length of service in the software industry and customer base.

Atlantic certainly ticks the right boxes in offering an end-to-end development service that finally addresses management, technical and commercial issues in one environment. Quality, predictability, repeatability and productivity, along with the agility and flexibility to innovate, which all appear on most customers wish-lists, are core themes running throughout this release.

IBM has rightly played on its cross-brand strength to offer a development infrastructure that closes the loop between development and deployment across a number of application domains. Support for the development team is extended beyond the traditional technical and business analyst roles to include support for project managers, executives and those responsible for the deployment environment. The idea of development as a process is given significant prominence in this release. It is reinforced in the modular structure of the development platform, the additional new features and the messages that IBM delivers in its marketing strategy.

All the pieces are in place to tackle the key phases of the development processes: requirements & analysis; design and construction; software quality; deployment management; process and project management; software configuration management. A monitoring and feedback framework that relates information between roles and the different phases underpins the platform. While its effectiveness has yet to be fully tested, its presence cements IBM's understanding of the key barriers between the business and the development team. The usual attention to standards also features prominently.

IBM's challenge

IBM has not released pricing details, which will be a concern to those who do not have a current support agreement and limited funds. However, the company's drive to define and supply the necessary infrastructure for an on-demand IT operating environment should ensure that flexibility, scalability and cost effectiveness are kept in mind.

It may still be some time before all the past negative perceptions of IBM disappear. The company has certainly dealt with some of its gremlins – a large complex product portfolio with many overlapping features. However, a number still remain.

The Atlantic release is an enterprise class solution which, despite assurances that other leading middleware environments are supported, favours the IBM platform stack. In this, the release continues to hint at the need for consultancy services, which



may well count against it. Competitors are likely to find it easy to convince end users that switching to Atlantic will be an expensive strategy.

However, such an accusation is shortsighted. Anyone serious about delivering more effective development projects should treat development as a process. Such a change requires an in-depth level of assistance that IBM is unquestionably able to deliver. Atlantic may not come without the need for additional services, but it is a viable long-term solution.

The challenge for IBM is whether it can appeal to a wider audience outside of its traditional customer base. An audience that – rightly or wrongly – tends to be more concerned with quick returns, costs, simplicity, agility, flexibility and interactivity – both internally and externally – than it is about having an in-depth technically correct implementation. Technically good the product may be, but its mass market success is likely to depend on winning over an audience that does not want to be intimidated by the need for expensive consultants.

Raising the bar for competitors

IBM is ahead of its competitors, but that is not to say that it is so far ahead as to leave its competitors standing. Both Microsoft and Borland have announced software development strategies that take equally pragmatic and process-driven approaches. Moreover, both companies also have components that better address parts of the lifecycle stack. Others like Mercury and Compuware offer a governance and testing environment that can certainly match, and in some cases surpass, those offered in Atlantic's release.

Where IBM really stands out is in its ability to offer a complete end-to-end development infrastructure that takes in all aspects of the application lifecycle – tying in commercial, technical and management pieces and promoting a process-driven approach. Furthermore, its offering will be available before any of the others.

IBM has also introduced the 'Ready for IBM Rational' compatibility programme. This is aimed at providing assistance to ISVs to ensure that their Eclipse plug-ins sit correctly within IBM's own Eclipse-based framework. The 'Ready for' logo is a neat reassurance tag that quickly advises end users of the integration and interoperability of other Eclipse-based solutions. IBM has been clever in finding a way to maintain a level of distinction. Unfortunately, the company only backs up the certification with a lightweight Q&A process that belies its good intentions.

Project portfolio management

IBM has also announced the addition of a new project portfolio management facility. Project portfolio management is widely considered to be a key addition to the software development process and pivotal to the successful management of IT development projects and resources. IBM has acquired Systemcorp – a long-time ISV partner providing project management capability for a number of IBM's software tools.



Integration is always an issue when acquiring new products. However, Systemcorp already has significant levels of integration with IBM's existing product portfolio. As a result it should be relatively easy for IBM to quickly deliver the level of integration that it has promised to offer with its portfolio manager. The Systemcorp acquisition also brings in IT governance capabilities, allowing IBM to more effectively compete with solutions offered by the likes of Compuware and Mercury.



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