

New Generation of MBS Products Planned

A future generation of Microsoft Business Solutions (MBS) applications will share a common code base, but one that's different from today's MBS products. Under a plan code-named Project Green, MBS will build a new set of entry-level business management applications using the forthcoming Microsoft Business Framework tools and APIs. Although today's MBS product lines will be maintained at least until 2012, Project Green will represent a clean break for developers, customers, and resellers. This discontinuity will simplify the product lineup and enable Microsoft to tightly integrate MBS products with "Longhorn" and other Microsoft applications, but could unsettle current MBS resellers.

FEW DETAILS SO FAR

Because MBS was created primarily through a complex chain of acquisitions, the division today includes several different product lines built on different code bases—the Axapta, Great Plains, Navision, and Solomon enterprise resource planning (ERP) products, and Retail Management System, a point-of-sale product for retail stores acquired from Sales Management Systems. MBS also sells other products that were developed internally, such as Microsoft Customer Relationship Management

(MSCRM). This blended family of products requires MBS to maintain separate planning cycles and development teams for products with significant functional overlap — an expensive prospect over the long run.

Instead of keeping these product lines alive indefinitely, Microsoft plans to build a completely new set of MBS applications from scratch, thus Project Green. These applications will emerge after the next version of Windows, code-named Longhorn, which will probably not be available until 2006.

Because the timeline is so long, very few details about Project Green are available: Microsoft has not revealed (and may not have decided) exactly which business applications will be included in the new product line or whether they will be backward-compatible with any of the current MBS applications.

However, Microsoft has released some general information about Project Green, as follows:

Simple functionality. At release, the Project Green applications will have a much narrower range of functionality than today's MBS products.

As Microsoft explains it, instead of trying to duplicate the complex manufacturing management functions of Axapta, or compete with high-end ERP vendors such as SAP, Project Green will initially focus on applications with a fairly broad potential audience, such as accounting, human resources, and CRM.

Based on the Microsoft Business Framework. A team in the Visual Studio group is currently working on a common set of developer tools and class libraries for business management applications. Built atop the .NET Framework and tentatively named the Microsoft Business Framework, this technology will provide standard and extensible definitions for business entities (such as customers) and standard ways of handling certain common business processes (such as transactions).

The Project Green wave of MBS applications will be based on this Business Framework, which means they will likely be built with managed code, offering benefits such as enhanced stability and reliability. In addition, given the planned time frame, these applications will probably take advantage of the next generation of Windows APIs, WinFX, which will be built into Longhorn.

Together, the Business Framework and the Project Green applications will form a common business applications platform on which partners, such as systems integrators and vertical market software companies, can build customized solutions.

No migration path. Microsoft is not making compatibility or a smooth upgrade path between

current MBS products and the future Project Green products a priority, and does not expect current MBS customers to migrate to Project Green. Rather,

Microsoft views the new lineup as a way of attracting mid-size businesses that don't currently have any business management software at all, or that have outgrown systems designed for smaller businesses, such as Intuit's popular QuickBooks application.

Microsoft has pledged to continue updating and supporting the current MBS product lines until at least 2012. However, given that one goal of Project Green is to reduce costs and streamline the MBS product lines, there's a risk that Microsoft will decrease the attention given to the current MBS products once equivalent functionality is available from the Project Green products.

WHAT TO DO?

Although the details of Project Green are still sketchy, some clear messages are emerging:

MBS developer partners, such as vertical ISVs and systems integrators, can continue building solutions on the current line of MBS products for several more years. But to capitalize on Microsoft's future plans for MBS, these partners will eventually have to turn their attention to the emerging Business Framework and Project Green applications. Because the Business Framework will almost certainly have close ties to Longhorn, these organizations should devote at least some development resources to exploring Longhorn technologies,

such as Avalon (which will simplify and improve graphics and the user interface for applications) and Indigo (which will simplify the creation of Web-connected applications).

Other MBS resellers, particularly those with a specialty in one of the four ERP product lines, should be aware that Microsoft plans to phase these product lines out eventually, and has not made any promises on compatibility or upgrade paths between today's products and their Project Green successors. As a specialty in a particular ERP line becomes less valuable, these resellers could compensate by developing expertise in one of the other specialty areas ("Competencies") that Microsoft is recommending for partners, such as networking infrastructure, business intelligence, or integrated e-business.

Potential customers for today's MBS products are faced with a difficult decision: buy a well-known and widely supported solution which Microsoft eventually intends to phase out, or wait for a new generation of products about which very little is known. Businesses with pressing problems for which current MBS products offer effective solutions should consider the planned end-of-life as one of several factors in their buying decision. But organizations that are not currently using business management software and see no urgent need for it, or that are using competing or internally built solutions, might want to wait for more details about Project Green to emerge; otherwise, they risk facing two complex and costly business management software installations over the next 10 years.