Podcast: SAP Solution Manager Roundtable - Hype Meets Reality

"An international roundtable on the pros and cons of Solution Manager, debated with grit and mutual respect"

Podcast Interview Date: May 9, 2010

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SAP Solution Manager is one of the most controversial topics in the SAP community. Though some see Solution Manager as the key to everything from post-go-live optimization to realizing the value of Enterprise Support, there is a noticeable gap between how SAP perceives Solution Manager and its customers' own experience. One way to close this gap is to bring honest discourse about SolMan out into the open. What better way to do that then a no-holds barred, roundtable podcast with three of the most influential voices in the blogosphere (and Twitterverse) on SAP Solution Manager?

When you begin a podcast, you never know how it will turn out. I had high hopes that the combined voices of Jim Spath, Tony de Thomasis, and Phil Avelar would advance the Solution Manager conversation with new insights and a clash of perspectives, but you never know. The end result exceeded my own expectations. With good humor but a frank style that underscored their different perspectives, these guys nailed it. We taped this four way, fifty minute podcast on Skype, and while the sound quality is solid, there is the occasional piece of background noise. I think you'll find that any occasional sound blips are more than worth it for the caliber of the content. Read further to check out the speaker biographies, podcast notes, and links to additional Solution Manager content.

ROUNDTABLE BIOGRAPHIES:

Jim Spath is a Technical Architect with a global manufacturer. He's an SAP Mentor and a long time ASUG volunteer. He writes some of the most readable technical blogs on SCN. Jim is presenting at ASUG 2010 on compressing database objects. Jim blogs frequently on Solution Manager (one example here).

Tony de Thomasis is a NetWeaver technician with more than 20 years of SAP Basis experience. He's an SAP Mentor and frequent speaker and blogger on the topic of SAP Solution Manager innovation, including its relevance to Application Lifecycle Management. Tony has been a key player in Australia Post's industry-leading example on deriving value from Solution Manager and he serves on the SAP Solution Manager Influence Council.

Phil Avelar is the Practice Manager for Advanced Solutions. As an advisor and project manager to his clients, he sees both the technical and business advantages (and drawbacks) of Solution Manager firsthand. Advanced Solutions frequently gives workshops to its clients on getting the most out of Solution Manager.

Podcast Highlights

0:00 Jon introduces the panel and frames the goals: advance the SAP Solution Manager conversation through an honest discussion - one that hopefully closes the gap between what SAP thinks Solution Manager is capable of and how its customers perceive the tool.

INTRODUCTIONS: Each member of the roundtable shares a bit about themselves and their experiences with Solution Manager so far

(1:05) 1. Tony: Got into Solution Manager as Australia Post grew its landscape from 10 instances to 90 instances. Tony thought SolMan could give his team the technical benefits to alleviate the Basis guys from repetitive tasks. I started by getting the SolMan Maintenance Optimizer "purring" to get the installation process streamlined. Then we moved onto to Early Watch Alerts, Service Level Reporting and IT Performance Monitoring. We peeled off every single Basis-related technical opportunity within Solution Manager. ordering them by which provided the biggest return on investment and quickest turnaround. Once completed, we "advertised" the achievements to his higher ups to achieve buy-in for future SolMan projects..."What makes the wheel go round is getting some funding from management."

(4:30) Phil: My experiences are almost the opposite of Tony's. As the Practice Manager for Advanced Solutions, in my day job, I manage projects on the project management side. My Solution Manager exposure has been more on the implementation side. If it seems like my clients are negative on SolMan, I should point out I've been a fan boy of Solution Manager since it first came out and have been promoting it to our customers back as far back as 3.1, before our customers were even required to implement it.

My company holds workshops on SolMan with IT Managers and Business Analysts to expose them to Solution Manager and help them to know what it's capable of. Once you get beyond hands-on IT folks, many of them don't know about SolMan's capabilities. On the implementation side, I've seen a variety of Solution Manager capabilities in action - I haven't worked with performance tools, but we've worked with everything from blueprinting to the Test Organizer to the blueprinting to the Service Desk, many of which are very useful tools.

(6:25) Jim: I'll try not to get to ugly but I definitely have some differences of opinion. I don't do SAP full time and I'm not on the Basis team. You could say I'm a part time Solution Manager user. I do blog on the SAP Solution Manager topic, and my Twitter bio says I'm an architect and a hacker. Speaking from my experience on my project, there are some folks who like and some who hate it. One of the people who spoke at one of my webcasts last year doesn't use Solution Manager even though they've been running on SAP for fifteen years. I've never seen a compelling case for most aspects of Solution Manager.

(8:25) Jon to Tony: What aspects of SAP Solution Manager are least relevant to you and what does SAP need to do to

make it more relevant? Tony: If you can compare this to BW or FI or other major deployments, you have a large team of consultants, major bug fixes, and no one complains about paying a lot of money to get a big ERP or BI system up. But loading up Solution Manager properly takes some serious artillery - it's not a simple system.

You can't expect one guy to do it, it's got to be funded. Everyone pays lip service to innovation, but how do you expect to run a huge landscape if you're not taking advantage of the platform that is being provided? As a technician, why would I even try to support a dual stack without Solution Manager? I've got so many better things to do than peruse logs. "Nobody wants to use a shovel when they can use an automated jackhammer."

(12:20) Jon to Jim: I thought I heard a comment from the peanut gallery when Tony said that "no on complains about paying a lot of money to get a big ERP or BI system up." Jim: It was a cynical response to the idea that everyone likes paying big money for big software which is not true. We take a best-of-breed, bare bones, minimalist approach. We don't have a full SAP suite of everything. SAP would like us to have more of their products but I don't see that as our future.

I still see competing products or no products in some cases being a better option. We do have a complex environment. We've been building enterprise management tools and using them for 15 years, but as a do it yourself company, we find that unless a product suits a particular need, we aren't going that route. The problems I've encountered - the complex crashes, the runaway processes, Solution Manager is useless for.

(13:45) Jon to Phil: We have two very different SolMan user viewpoints from Jim and Tony. In your talks with users, do they fall more into Jim's "We're only going to use this if it can really help us and enable us to cut costs" camp, or do you run into more in Tony's "Solution Manager is the key to our platform for innovation" camp? Phil: They fall more in line with Jim's views. Many of SolMan's tools may be very good, but most large enterprises already have internal tools that allow them to manage their ERP applications, their servers, their whole environment. They can't look at it as only an SAP world. IT managers say to me, "What is the business case for this? We'd have to train all our NetWeaver Admins on it? How can I justify it?" Business managers are looking for more of a compelling case than reducing the number of short dumps.

(16:40) Tony to Phil: SAP doesn't advertise itself to be the solution to everything, but SolMan is actually a great platform for integrating third party tools, including our HP testing tools which are integrated. If you don't want to use the Service Desk within SolMan, you can use others. SolMan is always adding more third party tool options. We're not a closed shop at the Australia Post. But if you're talking about monitoring SAP business processes, that's what Solution Manager is ideal for. You have to have a shed for your tools, and to me, Solution Manager is the shed to hold the tools and the processes and do the root cause analysis. And more and more, Solution Manager is an asset to the functional side and bring in a governance framework as well.

(20:05) Phil to Tony: If you're talking to a customer, then what's the compelling reason for using Solution Manager? If you already have tools in place and the people trained on it, what would be the argument for moving to Solution Manager? How would I justify it to the business? Tony: You may be implementing something new, like the new GL or Environmental Compliance. With the new tools, you can't use the old shovel. The old tools are not going to cut it. So it depends on what the customer is rolling out. If you're in maintenance, then SolMan is going to be a hard sell. But if you're rolling out new tools, it's irresponsible not to give Solution Manager a look to manage these new apps.

Phil to Tony: Agreed, but what if you have a customer with an existing environment? If you don't have a project and some funding, it's not going to fly. Tony to Phil: yes, but most people have a BI system. But what if they want BW accelerator so they can query millions of records and get it on their iPhone. In six months, this is going to be mainstream, and everyone is going to want SAP BWA. It's a pain to roll this stuff out. Complexity comes as business demands more access, and that's where SolMan can come in.

(25:15) Jim: We would never switch to SAP's Enterprise Scheduler from Solution Manager. It would have to be cheaper, better, and faster than our current scheduler, and I'm sure other companies have their preferred schedulers as well. The other issue is the user interface. When I go from Windows/Microsoft programs - which are not perfect but are intuitive, drag and drop, and then into Solution Manager, the UI is abominable.

(27:00) Jon to Jim: I have talked with a number of SAP users and Mentors about Solution Manager and here are their biggest criticisms: 1. They feel the tool was imposed upon them; 2. There is an education gap - they don't know how to use the tools provided; 3. The cost of getting the most out of the tool - is it fair to ask companies to invest so much in a tool in order to get the kinds of benefits Tony's team has gotten? Which of these resonate most with your experience?

Jim: In terms of training, my company is very progressive about sending people to training and getting them up to speed. It isn't a question of Solution Manager and learning how to use it, it's just hard to use. We've been using Business Warehouse for ten years in my company and it's easy to get folks up to speed - we do wonders with it. Funding is probably the killer. Companies don't see the justification for investing in a tool that has a limited business case and narrow vertical usage. I'm not "the guy who doesn't like Solution Manager. I get some things out of it, I put a lot into it, but I don't see it as the sharpest knife in the toolbox."

(29:52) Jon to Tony: When we discuss SolMan in the Mentor forum, most of them seem to come from you and your team. While the Mentors are not a huge group, there does seem to be a shortage of stories about good results from Solution Manager that don't come from you. If you were talking to SAP product leads about how to improve the tool so that more companies could get as much out of it as you, what would you say?

Tony: I'm on the Influence Council for Solution Manager along with a couple other large customers. Here are my top three problems with SolMan: 1. The way the agents work and don't work. We have to get those agents to be more robust, and I'm told that will happen with release 7.1; 2. I don't like the user interface - just give me one good interface that is consistent throughout; 3. I'm over CCMS for alerting. We can improve the way we can do the alerting. I've put this feedback forward to the SolMan product team.

Tony: It comes down to how much innovation you drive through your landscape - if you're not investing in Solution Manager, you're not serious about innovation, so I put it back on the customer in that sense. And you can drive further innovation from the cost savings you can get. Maybe SAP can help senior technicians within companies know what the benefits are. This won't drive itself - it will take someone who has passion for it and who can put their ass on the line and make the case. I'm done with talking about whether Solution Manager is mandatory or not. It's not mandatory to install CE 7.02 on my laptop either, but I do it. I'm passionate about helping my company innovate on SAP, so I do what it takes.

(35:35) Jon to Phil: Same question as Tony's: you hang up on this call and you get an invite to come to Walldorf for the weekend. How can they get more results like Tony is talking about? Phil: Talking about SolMan as a Swiss army knife is one thing, but they need to get the consultants out there and turn them into fan boys. Many of the consultants are not familiar with Solution Manager.

(37:30) Jon to Jim: I have a list of tools in SAP Solution Manager, when I'm done reading it, I want you to tell me which ones you think are good and which ones are not: Central System Administration, Project Management, Test Management, System Monitoring, Business Process Monitoring, Root Cause Analysis, IT Technical Reporting, Centralized Alerting, Installation/Maintenance Keys, Change Request Management, Service Desk, Custom Development Management, Business Process Change Analysis, SAP Software Downloads, Patch Management, Job Scheduling.

Jim: I've already done this, I have a report card in the webcast I did and the TechEd presentation I did last fall on what we're using and what we're not. As I already said, we're not using Job Scheduling, we already have a good tool for that. For Change Management, we have a tool we've been using for ten years, same thing with Help Desk. Let's talk about the next version of Solution Manager and the myth that Solution Manager is based on CRM. I've heard that before and I know I'm going to hear that again at the ASUG conference in a week and a half. It's not customer friendly, it's not user friendly. It's a management software tool but it's not the only one out there. (Tony: Solution Manager 7.1 is ramping up September 20, 2010 this year).

(40:20) Jon to Jim: same hypothetical question - what are you relaying to the SolMan product team? I'll take a pass on that - I have recommended going through the Influencer Council process on this. I'll continue to be a minimalist on this, the tool is going to sit in a drawer if I have no user for it. Jon to Jim: So you want SAP to consult heavily with SAP user groups and Influence Councils on the product? Jim: Yes - there is an ASUG Interest Group as well where feedback can be relayed. SAP does listen to the problems users are having with Solution Manager, I just don't like SAP hiding behind Solution Manager for bad code or bad help desk support.

(42:30) LIGHTNING ROUND - Last comments from each participants

(43:15) Tony on SolMan innovation - Jon, the tools you listed - these can be prioritized based on the pain points of the users. If you can knock down one or tow of the problems your company is facing, you're going to save them money and help them innovate. Second, if the company is deploying some kind of new functionality, by definition, that new functionality should be innovation. If you're bringing in a new process or a new tool, why would you not use the best tools to get it up and running and to user alerts to give yourself an ability to monitor in a more pro-active way? I don't need an army of 24 Basis guys to manage a landscape of 80 - I can do it with 10 guys because I've armed them with the best tools SAP has got.

(46:15) Jim on his upcoming Solution Manager training - As I said, we're progressive about training, I took training on Central System Monitoring a couple years ago, and we still don't have the resources to get that completely functional, so there are definitely some investment decisions companies need to make. I will definitely blog about my experiences with the training. In my environment, something that is a nice-to-have will typically slip. In the case of business process monitoring, there are a bunch of tools to do that - companies are not as cohesive as software vendors who advertise these tools think. There are competing agendas.

(49:30) Jon to Phil: What are you taking from this discussion? Phil: on the business side, SAP is going to have an uphill battle with Solution Manager. On the operational end, there's a much more compelling case for Solution Manger for the monitoring and tolls that Tony mentioned. We focus on talking to business managers, IT managers, and project managers that are implementing SAP, and for many areas such as test management, ALM type tools and help desk, most of these companies already have a tool that's out there. Personally I like all the tools that Solution Manager provides, I'm definitely a fan boy, we've had customer workshops featuring some of the configuration capabilities and the blueprinting tools and talked about extending them. For IT managers, it's kind of a catch 22: without the business content, Solution Manager is not very useful, but if I can't justify loading the business content in Solution Manager, I'm never going to use it.

(52:00) Jon's wrap: We can't wrap all the issues in this podcast - we didn't even get to the Enterprise Support/SolMan issues that would have been riveting if the support pricing based on the KPIs was still in effect. But we hopefully did help to bring a greater transparency to Solution Manager discussions.

(53:10) Jim Spath's surprise "musical outtro" and some riffing by the guys.

Webmaster's note: if you crave more Solution Manager content, check out the shorter SAP Solution Manager podcast Jon taped with Jim Spath recently. Tony and Jon are also co-facilitating an SAP Mentor Monday on Solution Manager in June - watch this space for details.