

Podcast: Technical SAP Skills in the Age of Outsourcing - Live from Madrid

"A live recording about the future of SAP tech skills, taped in the Madrid expert lounge"

Podcast Taping Date: November 8, 2011

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My first EMEA TechEd was a dandy. With all the JD-OD.com videos posted, it's time to catch up with the best of the audio, including this session on SAP technical skills from Madrid. Taped live at my expert lounge session on "SAP Tech Skills in the Age of Outsourcing," we had a great 25 minute discussion about SAP technical skills at the crossroads. The audience was about equally divided between Basis folks and ABAPpers, so we balanced the talk between SAP administration and development skills.

I was fortunate to have some very sharp participants who are well respected in the SAP community, including fellow SAP Mentor Michael Koch, who I asked to join the session to speak from the independent SAP developer angle. Tom Cenens, a highly regarded Basis expert, was also in the house. Halfway through the talk, SAP Mentor and PI expert Daniel Graversen stepped into the talk as well, which led us to a discussion about productizing SAP knowledge based on his SAP PI archiving tools and community building. CBasis (a.k.a. Christian Braukmuller) also chimes in during the talk.

The tensions between outsourcing and remaining viable as an on-site SAP professional were a major theme of the discussion. We also got into the importance of being an advisor not just a code cranker, the impact of SAP virtualization/cloud, the convergence of tech and business, the value of community to skills exposure, and why I believe if you don't have passion for SAP you should either find it or move on. If you enjoyed this one, you might also want to hear my SAP TechEd skills podcast from Las Vegas.

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Podcast Highlights

0:00 Intro: the tensions between being an invaluable on-site SAP pro in the outsourcing world.

1:45 Participant questions: 1. (Tom): What you think of SAP's new on-demand applications and how they effect a consultant like me doing system administration? 2. (C Basis): As a freelance SAP Basis consultant, how do I stay on top of all the new SAP products, not just ByDesign, and what about TCO? I still think cost of ownership is a problem. 3. How do outsourcing trends impact developers?

3:50 Jon's initial take - On the Basis side, we're moving toward hybrid landscapes. Very few customers are going to go all cloud, though some will outsource their entire IT departments. However, IT is not just a source of cost cutting, it's also

a source of competitive advantage, so not all companies will bail on IT. This means a gradual adoption of cloud-based products and virtual technologies. It's important to understand SAP's virtualization roadmap, including Virtual Landscape Management, and its predecessor, the Adaptive Computing Controller (ACC). It's also important to understand what elasticity means, and to be pro-active: take the case for virtualization to the business, explain how you can reduce server load by virtualizing landscapes, etc.

Of course, it's not yet about putting SAP production systems in the cloud in most cases, but when it comes to development, training, and testing instances, it makes sense to be ahead of the curve on that, instead of waiting for corporate marching orders. When we think about this whole question of the successful on-site consultant, it's about becoming an advisor. If we don't understand SAP's vision and can't explain it, we aren't on the right track. Then there's SAP's cloud-based applications, which can also include a ByDesign subsidiary play, and it's important to know how this could tie into the landscape as well.

7:15 Participant: cloud-based services bring up new topics: when you talk about integrating a Salesforce.com application, you have to be ready for the security aspects, and be ready to address that based on what the applications folks are going to request. Jon: security is rarely a separate skill set: 90 percent of the time, the Basis person is expected to have SAP security in the tool kit, and with security, you can throw in mobile access and BI as well. SAP security roles and authorizations are not necessarily compatible across these apps, and you need to know how to better optimize system performance, as well. Whether you're a consultant or a full time employee, you're always wearing two hats: How can I help my company cut costs, and how can I help companies capitalize on new business opportunities?"

9:00 Michael on being an independent SAP developer: I get asked that question many times a year, there's an aura around being an independent consultant, but you have to be careful first of all to be self-driven. You have to have an ability to promote yourself quite a lot as well, so that's a non-technical skill that matters. I think one of the reasons I've had a busy 18 months is that I've been talking about stuff that's relevant on my web site, and also feeding back information I get at TechEd and bringing it back. My informal motto is "keeping it real for my customers": tell them about the real pains and real issues. I think it goes without saying that keeping up to speed on new SAP technologies is very important. As an independent, you need to be one step ahead to justify the value add and the rate you charge. Let's face it - almost everything you offer, outsourcers offer that as well. 80-90 percent of this work can be done by outsourcing it. But then there's the last mile, that last few meters. It's like connecting electricity to a house, it's that last distance between the poles on the street and the house that matter the most - that's where you don't want your things destroyed and need the right fit. So it's not about dissing the outsourcing model, it's important to embrace it but make the case for you you can add value onto it. Jon: the debate about whether outsourcing adds value is done, but you're right - that last mile can never be totally taken away.

12:00 Jon: then there's the BPX thing - the convergence of tech and business, business process and industry, that's more value you can bring to the last mile. Business users often don't understand the SAP landscape and what's possible. They might be able to white board a process, but you may have better ideas for how the outsourced component can be managed. Daniel Graversen, how do you stay marketable? Daniel: What I'm trying to do is make some valuable content for the PI community and make a tool to that has value as well. Jon: that's another good example from a developer and marketability perspective - getting involved in community makes you smarter by interacting with other sharp developers. But building products, like Daniel's PI tool, gives you another way to sell into a company. When you have a product, you're not just a tech guy, productizing knowledge is a very valuable thing to do on the development side.

14:25 Jon on SAP development skills: object-oriented ABAP is a given, but like Basis folks, you want a hybrid skills approach, getting adept with Java-based technologies. The Neo/River platform is a given, and SAP is doing a better job of standardizing an Eclipse-based framework, not just Java but Ruby and such, so understanding that model and how you can contribute to it is vital. Then there's Gateway, which is fairly accessible as a download you can try, and there are other areas you can sign up for such as the HANA developer sandbox. Then there's InnoJam and Train Race, Innojam

happens frequently, and at InnoJam, Basis people can also contribute, so getting those new hands-on skills is vitally important.

16:20 Participant: Now SAP is more and more connected to languages and concepts like .NET and web services, and we should know a lot about web services, and that will be reality in a few years, that's what I've brought from a hands-on session that went through a few hours ago, where we were able to get a web service up and running in just a few minutes. .NET is much more handy in terms of building nice front ends for the customer. Michael: It's brilliant they have that bridge, and Gateway services - I thought they were going to create something like the Enterprise Services workplace. I needed some time to reflect on this, because Gateway is different than the SOA world where you can have an overpowering interface with 200 fields.

19:25 Participant: In the context of outsourcing, we need to think about the ABAP world, it's the same for me, I'm a pure R/3 guy, but we never heard anything about R/3 at TechEd 2011, We heard a lot about HANA, but ERP is still there! It's about getting the data to all these nice new apps. It's the connections there with ABAP and other options like .NET, knowing when to use each. I went to the university to study web services and nice front ends, and there I could make an interface in two seconds rather than make it from scratch in ABAP. So we need to understand these changes and how to use them. Jon: Speaking of .NET, the Business ByDesign and upcoming Line of Business development SDKs are both based on Microsoft Visual Studio and C#.

22:25 Jon's closing thoughts - If you don't have a passion for what you're doing in SAP, get out of the field, or find it what that passion is. You may not be able to find that within the joyful boundaries of your company walls, so that might mean switching jobs or taking on community based projects, something that drives you forward to become excellent. Community is a great orientation to have, whether its InnoJams or online projects, move forward with your skill set and get exposure to things. The key is to balance forward-thinking skills while remaining relevant today.

We know that SUP or HANA won't create thousands of jobs tomorrow so we need to understand the new stuff but staying equally relevant in the present, and find the skills thread that connects the two. If you can pull that off, the whole question of marketability starts to take care of itself a little bit. Marketability is a happy byproduct of doing things the right way. Opportunities come up as an organic result of doing things the right way. Many of you are already on that path, so it's more about continuing along that path than making a course correction. Bottom line: it's not just about tech skills, it's about techno-functional, the conversion of suits and geeks - next year, the wall between TechEd and SAPPHIRE Now may come down.