



Vendor Insight

Active Endpoints hits the event-driven BPM sweet spot

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The market for BPM technology is continuing to grow strongly and it's becoming more visible to mainstream buyers of software tools – and this means that there's increasing room in this market for offerings which are more tightly focused on 'traditional' software development teams than on specialist process analyst or business architect audiences. Active Endpoints is tackling this opportunity with its very capable and cost-effective *ActiveVOS* BPM Suite.

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Summary

Active Endpoints: now very definitely a BPM technology vendor

Although Active Endpoints started out in 2004 as a SOA infrastructure vendor, the company has since made a successful transition to being a supplier of BPM tools with its flagship *ActiveVOS* product. Although there are some capabilities found in other leading BPM offerings that *ActiveVOS* doesn't yet have, the technology is very credible and has many strengths.

ActiveVOS is part of a growing collection of BPM platforms aimed firmly at software developers

As the BPM technology market matures, the potential of the technology is becoming more visible to mainstream buyers of software tools. Whereas initially the market was driven by the interests of specialist audiences (professional business and process analysts, for example) now there's a very definite opportunity to deliver model-driven process application development tools to software development teams. Active Endpoints has a strong story here and a good and growing customer list as solid proof of its ability to deliver tools that fit naturally into the expectations of corporate software developers.

Event-driven BPM is Active Endpoints' sweet spot

ActiveVOS has a number of notable strengths, but the most striking is the way that event processing technology is embedded into the platform and its design environment. With this capability, *ActiveVOS* can support sophisticated event-driven BPM requirements – not only using environmental events detected to initiate processes, but also weaving environmental and process-originated events together to deliver sophisticated process analytics, manage process exceptions and behaviours on the fly, and coordinate activities within sophisticated event-driven process networks.

ActiveVOS: business-friendly tools for IT developers

Active Endpoints: From SOA to BPM

Active Endpoints was founded in 2004 as a provider of SOA infrastructure – specifically, a BPEL-based service orchestration engine, by former executives of Novell and Silverstream. Initially, the company was primarily focused on licensing its technology for embedding in other software.

In late 2007 and with the arrival of a new management team, headed by ex-IBM'er Mark Taber, the company began a shift into the BPM Suite (BPMS) marketplace. As well as developing and marketing its technology as a BPMS, Active Endpoints changed its sales approach too. Although it still licenses its technology for embedding by third parties, the company now focuses mostly on selling the software direct to enterprises.

Now, Active Endpoints works with its BPMS, *ActiveVOS*, in the financial services, telecoms and government sectors. It has over 120 customers in more than a dozen countries and employs around 40 staff in Massachusetts and Connecticut, USA.

ActiveVOS: covers all the must-have bases, plus some unexpected capabilities

ActiveVOS delivers most of the broad categories of capability that are commonly associated with BPM Suites, namely:

- Graphical process and task form design tools with additional tools for integration with back-end applications and systems (the Eclipse-based *ActiveVOS Designer*).
- A process runtime engine (*ActiveVOS Server*). *ActiveVOS Server* is a standard JEE application that is certified against a variety of common application server platforms.
- A process portal for process participants to manage their work in (the web-based *ActiveVOS Central* workspace).
- A performance reporting environment (*ActiveVOS Console*).

On top of these “basic building blocks” and integrated into the *Designer* environment, the *ActiveVOS* suite also includes a process simulation environment and set of functional testing tools.

Within its design environment *ActiveVOS* supports the BPMN 2.0 symbol set, but under the covers your BPMN models are converted to models based on *ActiveVOS*' extended BPEL implementation that are interpreted by its runtime engine. Today there's no modelling support for BPMN swimlanes and pools, but this is scheduled for a future release.

Nevertheless the vast majority of the common “behaviours” that businesses will want to implement are supported. The implementation of activities within processes is separated from process definitions, in line with the VWS-HumanTask and BPEL4People standards that *ActiveVOS* implements. What's more there are several productivity aids in the design environment – the most notable of which are import support for Microsoft *Visio* diagrams and XPD documents, the ability to quickly annotate models and export annotations as Microsoft *Word* process documentation,

Although *ActiveVOS* lacks some of the capabilities that some other BPM technology offerings have (the main examples are organisational modelling, which enables developers to specify roles, groups, and skillsets for process participants and separate these from process models; and externalisation of logical business rules so that non-developers can specify and potentially change them directly) there are some other features which particularly stand out.

The most notable of these is the tight integration with event processing technology, via *ActiveVOS*' embedding of ESPER's event stream processing (ESP) engine. Using the ESPER engine and *ActiveVOS*' scripting interface, developers can quickly build event processing rules that carry out sophisticated real-time analysis of events. Importantly, events can be picked up from the surrounding environment – but *ActiveVOS*' runtime server can also be quickly configured to emit events as process instances change state, too. What's more, it's easy to specify actions within the *ActiveVOS* runtime, as well as invoking external systems or web services.

This all means that developers can easily use the built-in event processing capability to not only kick off *ActiveVOS* processes when external events occur; they can also use this capability to build sophisticated networks of processes that communicate using events – allowing them to build systems that exhibit complicated and dynamic behaviours (such as those that telecoms operators might use to automatically provision complicated bundles of products and services). Lastly, because the ESPER engine is an ESP engine that has the concept of time intervals built into it, it's straightforward for developers to build rules that capture and correlate events to detect sophisticated process performance conditions, and use those to drive exception processing or advanced BAM dashboards.

Other notable strengths include:

- **The richness of the integration options and the maturity of the integration tools provided.** Given *ActiveVOS*' heritage as a service orchestration environment the out-of-the-box connectivity to multiple middleware technologies, sophisticated service discovery and integration tools, and policy-based service invocation capabilities are perhaps not a surprise – but they are more sophisticated than those provided by many other BPMS vendors.
- **The flexibility of *ActiveVOS Central*, the work portal.** Participants with the right permissions can not only start processes, carry out work and reassign or delegate work; they can also “rewind” process instances (restoring instance data to its previous state) in order to redo work or even restructure process instances on-the-fly.
- **Strong support for operational availability and reliability**, including built-in clustering support, the ability to deploy new process versions and quickly migrate currently-running process instances to a new version, and the ability to seamlessly migrate process logic and state from one server or cluster to another in the event of an infrastructure error.
- **Built-in integration with the popular open-source *Alfresco* content and document management platform.**

Putting the technology to one side, another of the company's main competitive differentiators is the ability for customers to get started with relatively small expenditure. Active Endpoints states that an initial *ActiveVOS* project can be kicked off and deployed with significantly lower investment than a project using technology from its direct competitors (typically IBM and Oracle). One *ActiveVOS* server license includes unlimited licenses for the Designer tool, and also licensing for the server's clustering and failover capabilities.

Hitting the event-driven BPM sweet spot

Active Endpoints positions *ActiveVOS* as a BPMS focused principally on the needs of developers: one that navigates a path between those BPMSs aimed at business users, and those BPMSs aimed at enterprise architects – both classes of product which it claims are too expensive for many.

It's certainly true that as BPM matures as a discipline and becomes more visible to “mainstream” buyers of software tools, there's room in the BPM technology market for offerings which are more tightly focused on “traditional” software development teams than on specialist process analyst or business architect audiences. However these offerings still need to be appealing to non-IT people and architects, because if the evolution of BPM thus far has shown us anything, it's that BPM is a team sport. As we often say, BPM is about improving the process of process improvement – and making that improvement real is fundamentally about fostering better collaboration between all the relevant stakeholders throughout the lifecycle of business processes.

Although Active Endpoints hasn't made a play in the area of high-level collaborative process discovery and modelling tools as some other BPMS vendors have, as the list above shows, *ActiveVOS* does do many things well that contribute to an environment where non-specialists can be brought into the picture.

The real stand-out strength of *ActiveVOS*, though, is its ability to combine event processing technology with a BPM environment that can not only address straight-through processing scenarios but also human-centric sequential workflow scenarios – and, via its integration with *Alfresco* and other CMIS-compatible content/document management systems – case management scenarios.

Future plans

Active Endpoints hasn't highlighted any specific initiatives it's currently pursuing, and is keen to stress that for now its main intent is to “stick to its knitting” – to keep delivering BPM technology capabilities to a broad mainstream software development audience, to help them engage constructively with other process improvement stakeholders (such as business managers and business analysts), and to keep educating and converting development teams to the benefits of process-based application development.