CIONET

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

INTEGRATION IN AN ERA OF AI: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

axway

Integration in an era of AI: challenges and opportunities
Insights from an evening of executive discussion

Integration of systems, processes, and data has long been an objective for organisations across the economy. Integration streamlines workflows, underpins digital transformation, and fosters innovation by allowing businesses to work with third-party services. It can, in turn, improve customer experiences and let businesses adapt to evolving market demands with minimal development effort.

The benefits are undisputed but barriers remain. And as businesses seek to roll out artificial intelligence-based applications, so the need to bring data together – and incorporate existing systems and processes – becomes ever more pressing.

To explore existing integration challenges and to understand how they are likely to evolve in an era of AI, CIONET – in association with Axway – brought together senior IT decision makers for an executive roundtable discussion.

Barriers to integration persist

Kicking off the evening, guests were asked to identify the hurdles that remained in place for those looking to implement a successful integration strategy. These included a lack of funding, siloed culture, security, data quality, and data access.

One attendee suggested that the "size, scale and complexity" of his organisations made the integration challenge almost insurmountable, while several other guests indicated that making the case for integration remained a fundamental challenge. "There's a lack of a clear roadmap," said one, while another pointed to the difficulty of measuring the likely outcomes of an integration initiative. Forecasting return on investment (ROI) proved elusive as a consequence. The overall result? "Inertia," to borrow a word use by another senior IT executive.

The merits of APIs (or otherwise)

Application programming interfaces (APIs) remain the de facto standard of integration, defining a set of rules and specifications that allow different software systems to communicate and interact with each other. They may pre-date Amazon but a memo from founder Jeff Bezos in 2002, helped entrench their use. In what became known as the 'Bezos API Mandate, he asserted that all capabilities at Amazon would have to be designed and exposed as APIs. Key to their value, the memo argued, is the network effect, a multiplying force that creates most value by heightening efficiencies and opening up new business opportunities.

A consensus around the table suggested wide support for – and adoption of – APIs despite some inherent challenges (see below). Nevertheless, one attendee questioned their use in certain situations. Dividing API deployment between client-facing and internal use, he felt that in the latter case APIs added a layer of unnecessary complexity, cost and delay to projects where other solutions could be used to tie systems together. Most others took an opposing view. In the words of one: "If you don't have an API strategy you have to work port-to-port. That soon turns into spaghetti."

Enter AI. Introducing MCPs

Model context protocol (MCP) could be seen as the API of the AI era. An open standard developed to regulate how large language models access and use external data, tools, and services, MCPs are potentially the missing link between the possibilities of generative AI (GenAI) and the ability for organisations to make GenAI work for them. Similarly A2A (Agent-to-Agent) protocols allows for different AI agents to communicate with each other, and to collaborate on tasks.

Both protocols are likely to become increasingly popular as organisations prepare their data for GenAI deployment, and as they seek to remove some of the ambiguity inherent in a probabilistic tool such as GenAI.

The perpetual challenge of integration tools

Whether it's a case of deploying APIs, MCP, A2A – or even precursors such as electronic data interchange (EDI) and managed file transfer (MFT) – two things will inevitably occur, argued one attendee. First, their use will proliferate. Second, and as a consequence of the first, the business will struggle to gain control. API "sprawl" is likely to become MCP "sprawl".

It is both a reflection of the popularity of these tools – there would be no sprawl without proven efficacy, after all – and an indicator of an urgent management issue. The irony of deploying tools built for integration that end up creating uncontrolled proliferation, is unlikely to be lost on enterprise architects, product owners and business leaders.

Who owns integration, anyway?

Some argue that integration – as a solution to a problem rather than business capability in its own right – should remain the purview of the technology department. It's a tool to be deployed in the interest of the business, so the argument goes. Others insist that it is a business function, and only by putting the business in charge of it will organisations begin to address the sprawl and embrace the greater business value. According to Forrester for example, the business – not IT – owns its API strategy in 37 per cent of cases. A significant number but not a majority. Forrester analyst David Mooter, insists that the business, not IT should lead your API strategy.

One attendee insisted that it was not an "either / or". Rather the business and IT should be responsible for integration in tandem. When it comes to data integration, she said: "IT and the business should be in lock step. After all, sometimes data is a technical problem. Sometimes [when records need updating, for example] data is a business problem."

''Integration in an era of AI: challenges and opportunities' – a CIONET executive roundtable event in association with Axway – took place on Tuesday 17 June 2025 at Andaz London Liverpool Street.

About CIONET

CIONET is the leading community of more than 10,000 digital leaders in 20+ countries across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Through this global presence CIONET orchestrates peer-to-peer interactions focused on the most important business and technology issues of the day. CIONET members join over a thousand international and regional live and virtual events annually, ranging from roundtables, programs for peer-to-peer exchange of expertise, community networking events, to large international gatherings. Its members testify that CIONET is an impartial and value adding platform that helps them use the wisdom of the (IT) crowd, to acquire expertise, advance their professional development, analyse and solve IT issues, and accelerate beneficial outcomes within their organisation.

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