



## Is outdated agent technology the Achilles Heel of service assurance software?

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A swan floats serenely across the pond and we marvel at its majesty. Yet under the water's surface, there's an ugly duckling paddling like crazy to move forward. Business is a lot like that, says Dan Baker. When we see a large company's elegant website, advertisements, and revenue growth, we believe there's great order and stability in the business world. In truth, every good business must constantly transform itself to stay relevant.

**Oracle Corporation** is one of the greatest high tech companies of all time, in part, because it's found a way to continually renew itself. To complement its organic growth, Oracle has acquired dozens of innovative companies over the years. And with each merger, Oracle employees know that a certain percentage of the

workforce may be let go to keep the mothership on an even keel.

As an industry analyst, I'm always curious where the key people go after such mergers. Often, the firms they join or the new companies they create are the next generation of innovators. Recently, I



met a start-up billing and charging company, California-based **MATRIX Software**, and many of the executives there are Oracle alumni.

Only four to five years ago, the network / service assurance (NA/SA) sector went through a massive transformation and renewal as companies like **HP, IBM, CA, and EMC** acquired innovators like **Wiley, Micromuse, and Smarts**. IBM, for one, paid an astounding US\$850 million for Micromuse.

So what's the result of those transformations? Well, according to Mark Cowan, CEO at **Abilisoft**, there's a problem: the big assurance firms are not investing enough to grow the technology they acquired, and in the process they're slowing innovation.

These are bold words, but Mark speaks with some authority. After all, he co-founded and ran, **Abilitec**, one of the leading European suppliers of IBM / Netcool services, consultancy, support and training until he and his partner Andy Onacko sold the business in 2007 to **Innovise Enterprise Service Management (ESM)** for \$10 million.

Abilitec did lots of work for **BT's 21st Century** project, **Vodafone, Deutsche Telecom**, the Dutch telcos and many financial institutions, primarily in Europe, but also Asia, Singapore and Australia.

Now Mark and Andy are at it again, seeking new opportunities to add value through a new assurance company they've formed and self-funded called **Abilisoft**. My discussion with Mark ran the gamut from management layer integration problems and agent intelligence to changing licensing models and the need for **NGOSS** plug-and-play.

**Dan Baker: Mark, I'm curious why guys like you who have successfully sold their B/OSS companies don't retire to the Bahamas, kick off the sandals, and enjoy Margaritaville?**

**Mark Cowan:** I'd be bored! Maybe in 10 years or so, but the market is too exciting a place to be

right now, so it's too soon to even contemplate retirement.

**DB: Tell me, what's your beef with the way the large assurance firms are handling their product portfolios?**

**MC:** Dan, the products in the monitoring and OSS/BSS space are largely the same ones that existed at the end of the last century. In the last few months I've seen 4 to 6 RFI's which are asking to refresh toolsets in assurance.

The incumbent software vendors have also raised prices substantially. I've got a customer who was quoted UK£15,000 (€17,700) per server for a management platform when the value of the server is only £3,000 (€3,540). That's crazy. The big players will try to sell you a framework product from the bottom up, but they have multiple generations of product heritage in these larger SA packages. The name on the box may be Big Brand X, but the products underneath are all different legacies and often not glued together properly.

**DB: Now, I understand you sell a service called Monitor the Monitor, which does what the title suggests: monitors monitoring systems. But why is such a service needed in the first place? It sounds redundant.**

**MC:** You wouldn't think managing a management system made sense, but consider this real-world scenario. A couple of guys were in the NOC and experienced a very quiet night on the network. But what they didn't notice is that the event collection system had crashed. The management views were still alive so nobody noticed! The system was down for 8 hours and coincidentally a major customer suffered an outage during that period resulting in a costly SLA breach.

That's why we developed a product that looks under the covers to see if monitoring systems are working as they're intended. We have created a business model whereby our integrator partners sell this service as an add-on to a support contract. ►

"...the lower layers were neglected.

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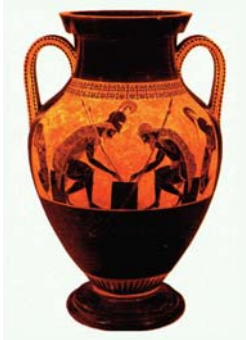
**- Mark Cowan, Abilisoft**

As Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of Abilisoft, Mark Cowan is responsible for the company's strategic direction and growth. Prior to this, Mark was CEO at Abilitec, Europe's largest Tivoli Automation Services partner; a company that consistently delivered double-digit growth year-on-year. Abilitec was acquired by Innovise Plc in 2007, and for the next two years, Mark managed Innovise's ESM division and successfully integrated a number of businesses within that structure.



Dan Baker is the Principal Market Synthesizer and Co-founder of Technology Research Institute (TRI). He is also research director of a new online community, the Revenue Assurance Roundtable.





“Every technology market needs a safety valve.”

- Mark Cowan,  
Abilisoft

The key issue here is a failure in the event collection or agent layer of the system. And much of the current agent technology is quite old -- 15 years old in many cases.

The major vendors are delivering the management layer and service views very well, and that's been their publicity front in the past few years, but it's just not good enough if the bottom data collection layer is not robust.

**DB: Mark, what you're saying must be causing a bit of a stir. The network / service assurance software business was supposed to be mature: the big guys swallowed up most of the little guys – end of story. And the battle for leadership was all about leapfrogging competitors to become the Manager of Managers. That's the trump card Micromuse played so well. But now you're saying these well-entrenched products are vulnerable at the data collection layer?**

**MC:** Micromuse Netcool was a great product. And I'm not casting doubt over the other major players in the market. That's not the point. The problem – and this is what I hear from all of the new business opportunities that we are working on – is that these manager of manager solutions are often built on legacy products at the lower layers.

Good dashboards and visibility at the service management layer are important, but if the underlying infrastructure is weak, it doesn't mean a thing. It's fundamental.

And as these large companies acquired smaller companies to build market share, the investment went into the upper layer interfaces while the lower layers were neglected.

To give you an idea, one of our customers was rolling out 130Mb agents within its monitoring package. That's very clunky technology and a nightmare to manage. By contrast, the agent we offer is at most 30Mb and uses minimal CPU and memory. Even though the price of memory has come down, having a small footprint is key to keeping the agent layer light, nimble, and lightning fast.

But having a small footprint is only one of the issues. Another critical innovation is agent intelligence. When Abilisoft deploys agents on existing systems, they are designed to call back on their own to a central web server. So, if you want to update instructions to all the 2,000 agents that our customer has deployed, then the agents go back to the web server automatically – say every month – and ask the central web server if it has an update.

So, it's a very simple mechanism for updating all your agents. And it doesn't involve customer interfaces and a lot of expense in updating. The newer agents can do things autonomously. They know what's around them too, so if an event

comes in, they can also take some local action in response.

Another issue is the ability to make changes in the agent layer. For example, you might have a bunch of servers that are always running at 95% CPU, but the standard monitoring protocol is to send an alert at 75%.

Now, so you're not flooded with alarms, Abilisoft enables the local team responsible for those servers to set the threshold at 96%. In other words, the local IT team can self-provision their agent technology to suit their local business needs. And this also reduces the workload on the OSS teams. You're not just saving time and enabling a more nimble organisation, you're also radically reducing maintenance costs.

**DB: How disruptive is it to insert new agent technology in an existing monitoring system?**

**MC:** It's relatively pain-free to implement our agent technology.

One of clients, a major Swiss bank, has acquired dozens of different data collection technologies over the years. For them we installed a new, more robust agent that goes directly to the EMSs and network elements and rolls up the data to whatever management platform the customer chooses.

So we've automated a lot of the bank's processes, which in fact, was a major requirement. In addition, the Mean Time to Repair is now rapid, plus the customer realises even more cost savings from self-healing. Abilisoft's philosophy is to replace the bottom agent layer and leave everything above the same.

**DB: Finally, Mark, I'm curious about your plans for growing Abilisoft . . .**

**MC:** In the UK market, we certainly can help carriers do things better at the agent layer. But emerging markets are probably a bigger opportunity long term because there we can go straight in and put newer and better solutions in from scratch.

Our key message is: "We don't care who you choose for the upper service management layer, just install our agent technology underneath it all to make sure the overall solution performs." It all goes back to the NGOSS idea of connecting various independent components to deliver a best of breed solution. Every technology market needs a safety valve to prevent a few big companies from gaining so much market share that they can dictate prices and get away with delivering an inferior product.

Even still, powerful incumbents are useful in one way: they provide a golden opportunity for challengers like Abilisoft to prove their mettle. 🐉

**VanillaPlus  
Jargon Buster**

**NGOSS** = Next Generation Operations Support System

**RFI** = Request for Information