Siemens: Blogging and Beyond

Applies to:

SAP NetWeaver, Portal, Knowledge Management, Visual Composer, Composition Environment

Summary

Richard Hirsch has been involved with SAP and SAP NetWeaver for over four years. Starting as an operations manager for an Enterprise Portal (V 5.0), Mr. Hirsch has since worked with a variety of internal and external customers as a developer, project manager, and consultant focusing on SAP NetWeaver projects. His areas of expertise include Portal, Knowledge Management, Portal Integration and SSO, CAF and other Enterprise SOA-related areas.

Currently, Mr. Hirsch is a senior Portal/SAPNetWeaver consultant for Siemens IT Solutions and Services PSE. He recently spoke with Senior Editor Talila Baron about his passion for blogging on the SAP Developer Network (SDN) and Business Process Expert (BPX) Community, and his involvement in a new pilot, the BPX Community Project, on the SDN Wiki.

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Author Bio

Talila Baron is senior editor of SDN. She manages the SDN Newsletter, SDN homepage, and other special projects for SDN.

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Baron: Are you a member of SDN, BPX, or both?

Hirsch: I've been part of SDN for 3 years, and have joined BPX more recently.

Baron: What are the challenges that apply to your company?

Hirsch: Siemens is a rather large company. We have two main challenges: The first is our enormous diversity. We have nearly 480,000 employees and 13 divisions with various corporate departments. In addition, geographically dispersed business units have different types of SAP systems (occasionally based on different versions) and legacy systems, so bringing it all into a cohesive whole is quite a challenge.

The second challenge is our distributed environment. Different business units have their own IT landscapes rooted in their own back-ends. Whether it's based on enterprise service-oriented architecture or some other basis, these different systems have to work together.

Baron: What was the "pain point" that motivated you to use SDN or BPX to address these challenges?

Hirsch: When I was a developer, I would find a problem I would have to solve. Before solving a problem on my own, I'd go to SDN, make a post in a forum, then get the answer. It was a huge information resource.

So the main reason to use SDN was the ability to get technical information. I always looked at SDN's library resources to get materials. I also used blogs to communicate my ideas to others, and the forums to get my questions answered. For example, when I was working in the KM area, I was posting questions about collaboration room extensions – something that's pretty specific in terms of programming level – and I was stuck. I couldn't find documentation. But I got the answers I needed in the forums. Within one day, in fact!

If you compare SDN to resources that existed before, say, to SAP Notes, SDN is unique in that it is open to people outside of SAP. That was fascinating to me. Then there's the speed it takes to get answers – often within a few hours of posting a forum question.

Baron: Can you provide tips on how to best use SDN or BPX forums?

Hirsch: If you have a general question, someone will likely come back right away with a response. If you have a specific, technical question, it might take longer, because people who have that level of knowledge may or may not be on SDN every single hour. The great thing about forum posts is, you know right away whether the people who answer the questions are knowledgeable or not.

Baron: What does it take to become an active contributor?

Hirsch: People have two scenarios for using SDN. They say, 'I have a problem I want to solve, or I have information to share.' That's the impetus for participating in forums and blogs, respectively.

To become an active contributor, meaning one with over 250 points, you have to be creative and excited to share your ideas with others. Blogs are essentially a creative medium. In my case, I wanted to get my ideas out there and people have to have that impulse. I like to get others excited and involved, because the technology is so new, and there's lots of room to collaborate and connect. Take the Wiki, for example. It lets people share information in a collaborative manner. People can work together on one document simultaneously, which is very different from how a blog works.

Baron: What's the impact of SDN participation for you at Siemens?

Hirsch: Colleagues in my division (Siemens IT Solutions and Services PSE) read my blogs, say, on distributed processes. The blogs then generate discussion, raise questions, and fuel ideas. But it's not just within my own office. Across the entire organization, from here to India, people have heard about my work from my SDN blogs. Blogs present another way for information to flow between colleagues.

Baron: What kinds of blogs do you most often write?

Hirsch: I write two types of blogs: Technical and conceptual blogs. In doing so, I'm helping to educate developers (in our division and other companies) on a new technology. This works towards the bottom line, because it lets our developers learn new technologies quickly and efficiently. It also expedites the education process in our division. Rather than sending people to courses, I'm able to use blogs to provide value to our internal people.

In turn, what it means to our customers and potential customers is that we can showcase our skills and prove our expertise. Ultimately, I have no idea who our customer will be in one or two years. Things change too quickly. But, by leveraging SDN, we're proving our prowess in both the conceptual and technical area. So when we acquire customers, blogs on SDN show people we can handle this technology, which again impacts the bottom line. SDN/BPX membership has become part of our calling card.

Baron: What motivates you to write a blog?

Hirsch: I try to look at areas that are not defined currently. My goal is to help my company, and other companies, better understand these areas. Often, after I've published my blog, people say to me, 'Let's work together internally.' For me, it's a benefit because it brings higher awareness of what I do, but it's also a huge benefit to the company.

Baron: What are you trying to achieve through membership to either SDN or BPX?

Hirsch: From a purely personal side, I like to blog. It's a creative outlet. Longer term, the Wiki is more intriguing to me. It gives people the ability to work together.

The BPX Community Pilot, for example, lets people work together on a design, which is fascinating. And the experiences we gain through the Wiki could be used elsewhere, say, in an Enterprise SOA project. I want to examine more closely how the Wiki can be used, and want to see what happens when people play with 'scripts.' Scripts enable people to express themselves more freely in an online environment.

Ultimately, my belief is that you can usually work out technical stuff on your own, or find answers to your questions on SDN. But the gap is between business needs and technology. And this gap is where the real work is. That's where a collaborative, playful environment like the Wiki is important.

Baron: What is the overall impact of SDN or BPX to your business? What did you learn or gain from participation in the communities?

Hirsch: I'm an information consumer and producer. When I want information, I can find it on SDN much faster than through Google. Speed of response, being able to respond to others quickly – those are the key advantages of SDN.

In terms of my role as an information producer, the collaboration with others is crucial. For example, I did a forum post on Visual Composer. In that post, I wrote that I wanted to use portal roles in Visual Composer. I got responses that it wouldn't work. Then I went ahead and tried it, and achieved it on my own. I wrote a blog describing my solution and then I came back to the forum and posted a link to my blog. I got very encouraging responses.

Another example: In the CAF forum, there was a post regarding run-time programming. A person needed some examples. I said in the forum that I was doing a blog about this very issue. I wrote the blog and updated the forum post with my blog. Right away, I got a comment in my blog from the person who posted the original question saying that it was just what he needed!

One final example: I was doing an installation using Rapid Installer, ran into a problem, looked into the forums, and quickly found an answer. As it turns out, it was an obscure Oracle problem.

Baron: How do you work with other developers or business process experts on SDN and BPX?

Hirsch: These days, I'm shifting more to blogs and the Wiki, and using forums less. This is because the work I'm doing now is more conceptual, less technical. When I have a technical problem, I go into forums. When I have a conceptual idea, I express it as a blog. The Wiki is a great tool for conceptual work and pilot projects.

Baron: What is the differentiator with SDN or BPX (over other communities)?

Hirsch: For a developer site to succeed, new information has to be there—meaning, new blogs, new resources, and a constant flow of information and tools, such as the Wiki. SDN, with over 750,000 members, has reached critical mass. The quality and flow of information is what differentiates SDN.

Baron: How has participation in SDN or BPX increased the recognition and credibility of your company?

Hirsch: Every time I'm on the front page of SDN or BPX, Siemens is there as well. When I'm featured, I'm being profiled as someone who has expertise, and therefore, so is Siemens as a company.

Baron: What are your next steps with SDN or BPX?

Hirsch: I will continue writing blogs. Initially, I had a backlog of 20 blog topics. I've written them all almost.

Going forward I will work extensively with the Wiki, which is intriguing for both SDN and our development projects. For example, I would like to do polling. I'd give people three business scenarios and ask which one is best via a poll. Wouldn't that be terrific? And working on new designs on the Wiki is also important.

Very few companies see the Wiki as a project environment, but that's the real potential. When the BPX Community project gets more developed, it would be great to publish articles about it, give it exposure, and see it take off!

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