The Onboarding Challenge

by Chris Hayes, Senior Product Marketing Manager, Sterling Commerce, an IBM Company

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When companies integrate people, processes and technology, they can expect to see:
• Better communication and collaboration;
• Better automation and extension of business processes;
• Better manageability and visibility; and
• Fine-grained optimization of trading partner relationships.

Despite these benefits, very few companies have achieved electronic communication with 100 percent of their business-to-business (B2B) community. Changing business requirements brings new partners, and shifting standards and protocols further complicate relationships with both existing and new B2B partners. Also, the onboarding of new partners and documents is slowed by the requirement to adhere to B2B service level agreements (SLAs), regional/global trading differences and the need to overcome the inertia of manual, disconnected processes.

The process for onboarding trading partners typically includes a series of manual steps, even where both sides have B2B software. On top of that, with a manual onboarding process, successfully setting up one partner usually does not make future setups any less painful. All of the cost and effort must be repeated for each new partner, with each partner being handled in the same manual way every time a new B2B connection is made.

Once partners are onboarded, the relationship must be maintained in order to continue to do business. Maintenance tasks can include migrating to a new standard, changing the implementation of a given standard or, most commonly, updating security certificates before they expire. This ongoing maintenance of existing, onboarded partners and relationships can be resource-intensive and potentially impact the timely and effective execution of a company's business processes, with all of the revenue and customer satisfaction issues that this can bring.

What was once a resource-intensive and tedious process with many manual inputs can now be automated with community management software and services, a much more efficient method for making the initial connection to trading partners and also for the ongoing management of the relationship. Community management enables companies to extend B2B to a greater percentage of their partner community, increase the number of document types being traded electronically and reduce the costs of managing B2B relationships. These solutions can significantly accelerate B2B projects and enable companies to manage larger, more complex B2B communities with less cost, resulting in faster time to revenue, improved customer relations and reduced supply chain costs.

Community management solutions also can reduce the time it takes to onboard a partner due to sharing and re-use of existing profiles and by allowing partners to become active participants in the onboarding and maintenance processes. Rather than manually obtaining information from partners and then manually updating its internal systems with that information, community management solutions enable partners to provide this information directly while ensuring that the company still retains full control.

Four key steps to implementing B2B community management

But how can an organization get started with B2B community management? The process starts with identifying which partners are best aligned with their B2B initiatives. Being able to identify and then contact those trading partners that would be the best candidates for adding value to B2B initiatives is a crucial first step in creating and developing a community.

Next, connect, test and integrate business processes with the partners. Companies should review policies and profiles and configure B2B systems to integrate with the workflow of their trading partners. This integration needs to be able to scale to span multiple systems, partners and processes.

Once the company has connected and integrated with its business partners, the next step is to ensure visibility across partner communities and onboarding projects.   Having a clearer view into partner activities allows more efficient onboarding. It maximizes the effective use of resources by identifying where partners are not making progress and focusing resources on assisting only those partners that need it. This visibility also can help determine where partners may have electronic commerce capabilities that are not being fully exploited.

The final step is the ongoing management and support of partner relationships. Community management tools and services can help manage the technical aspects of a B2B relationship such as the standards and protocols used with partners. In addition, they can provide assistance across communities to ensure that SLAs are met and customer commitments are delivered against.

Why Now?

The unstable economy and availability of better technology is pushing companies to transform and optimize their B2B operations. Investing in a community management solution can significantly reduce the time to onboard partners, enabling accelerated time to revenue and improved customer relationships. Furthermore, ongoing maintenance is significantly reduced with partners able to take control over their own information to reduce the total effort to onboard and maintain the relationship for both the organization and its partner. With effective community management, companies can onboard, expand and manage their partner communities more quickly, more accurately, and with fewer resources.