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Technology & Suppliers

TIBCO Cloud Live Apps: mojo returning

June 2017

Live Apps is a low-code application platform aimed at helping tech-savvy business teams replace casually-created systems built using SharePoint, Access, or Excel and email. At a high level this is nothing new, although it's a significant departure for TIBCO; but in the detail there are five important differentiators.

When TIBCO bought Staffware in 2004, it acquired a team of real BPM pioneers.

The team set about building a new product from the ground up: ActiveMatrix BPM. This is a product with some real market-leading features, but there's no denying that TIBCO never managed to carve out the BPM technology market share that it expected or hoped to. It's a high-end product with a serious price tag, and TIBCO's technology-focused sales force was never really set up to market the product to the business side. Long sales cycles and TIBCO's larger structural challenges as a public company made further product innovation difficult for a number of years.

Since the company's private equity buyout in 2014 there's been a significant amount of management readjustment. At the technology level, TIBCO (like many other vendors) has rethought the way it develops products, adopting a more agile approach.

The team that built ActiveMatrix BPM has been busy. Today, with the launch of TIBCO Cloud Live Apps at TIBCO NOW Berlin, the company is revealing what looks like an impressive offering.

Introducing TIBCO Cloud Live Apps

Live Apps is a low-code application platform, aimed at helping tech-savvy business teams build and deploy process-aware applications to replace casually-created systems built using SharePoint, Access, or Excel and email.

It's a cloud-based platform with highly visual, web-native design and administration tools, and it imposes a case-centred application architecture. You first design the information your case will manage; then define a series of "states" that your case might pass through on its way to resolution, before defining the actions (tasks and workflows) that will drive the progress of cases through those states (also highlighting which actions are available in which case states).

At this high level TIBCO Cloud Live Apps is hardly ground-breaking stuff, although it's a real departure for TIBCO. A growing set of vendors (not least, Appian, Pegasystems, Ultimus and ServiceNow) can give you something very similar.

It's in the detail that Live Apps really starts to look a bit different.

Five differentiators in the detail

First, there's the nature of the design experience itself, and the attention that's been paid to enabling a true 'gifted amateur' persona to deliver value. The tools in Live Apps don't exhibit any of the 'tells' that so often plague tools like this – particularly tools from established enterprise technology vendors. A key example of the attention to detail here is what TIBCO calls the "design by interview" approach encoded in the tools, where wizards embedded in the design interface do not assume you know any detail of how to construct applications. Instead Live Apps guides you by nudging you to answer non-technical questions. All the help content for Live Apps is embedded in the tools themselves, and much of it is delivered via video.

Second is the application sophistication that's possible with the very simple, stripped-down design experience. TIBCO has obviously been listening to our pleas to vendors to improve their offerings by "throwing stuff out of the box". Three key examples of that are the ability to:

- Go beyond simple case data representations, and include (and reuse) user-defined compound types.

- Define sub-states as well as states for cases;

- Enforce common work distribution patterns like separation-of-duties.

Third is the inclusion of a simple visual integration tool for creating connections between your applications and other SaaS applications, or perhaps more importantly, through to on-premises applications and databases (via an included VPN tunnelling service). Integrations you create are then made available in TIBCO Cloud Live Apps as services for direct consumption within your applications. The same process orchestration capability used for running workflows in your applications underpins integration flows you can create here; here, though, your flows orchestrate integration tasks. There's a graphical design environment for specifying flows and individual tasks (such as data mapping), but by necessity the tool is a little more technical than the visual design tools used to specify your case application behaviours.

Fourth is the approach to pricing and licensing. Initially, TIBCO is offering a Professional and an Enterprise Edition: both editions include the integration capability, but a future release will enable an entry-level license for the low-code application capability only (no VPN tunnelling). Crucially, while the Professional edition uses a traditional per-user-per-month licensing scheme, the Enterprise edition uses a per-application licensing scheme (with unlimited users allowed per application). Pricing for both Professional and Enterprise editions appears very competitive, and the flexibility here is something that most other vendors overlook.

Fifth and last is TIBCO's approach to product development and architecture. The two capabilities embedded in TIBCO Cloud Live Apps today – low-code application development and integration – run on the same underlying platform with the same service enablers (billing, account management, single sign-on, etc). But crucially, TIBCO is working on a broader range of cloud capabilities that will all leverage the same fundamentals. Moreover, key application design assets (like data definitions) will also be shared across the portfolio of capabilities.

Open questions

TIBCO has something with real potential on its hands here, but one of the things that created challenges for ActiveMatrix BPM – the established go to market approach and focus of the broader TIBCO machine – could also get in the way here. How the company brings Live Apps to market will be crucial.

The company would do well to learn some lessons from the introduction of social collaboration platform tibbr in 2011 – a 'guerilla' initiative that circumvented the bulk of TIBCO's established marketing guidelines, sales and contracting frameworks, and so on. TIBCO's heritage may well weigh down Live Apps; if it's to achieve the results it deserves to, the company will need to be creative.

TIBCO Cloud Live Apps is available here.