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MICROSOFT UNVEILS PROGRAMMING TOOLS KEY TO .NET STRATEGY

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Article Text:

Two years ago when Microsoft started talking about becoming the architect of a new networked world, many observers dismissed its plan, dubbed .Net, as ''vaporware.'' Today, Microsoft begins selling the first product that could turn its blueprints into reality -- the virtual hammers and nails to build it.

Aimed at software developers, the new set of programming tools called Visual Studio.Net will get an official launch by Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates today in San Francisco.

The company whose software runs 90 percent of the world's personal computers now intends to run a vast array of integrated services over the Web. Web services, as envisioned by Microsoft and competitors such as Sun Microsystems and IBM, would link data across the Internet to help businesses cut costs and make life more convenient for consumers.

Scandinavian Airlines, for example, is testing a .Net application that would let customers check flight status and get other information from their handheld devices. Newport News Shipbuilding is testing another application to boost efficiency by using handheld computers to check on parts and manage repair projects.

There is fierce competition in the growing Web services area. Tech research firm Gartner estimates that sales of Web services software will increase fivefold to $21 billion by 2005.

'Milestone event'

Microsoft is eager to win over developers so they will use its tools to build applications running on its Windows platform. Developers play a vital role -- no matter how much industry giants talk about grand plans, Web services won'ttake off without basic applications that companies and consumers find compelling.

The release of Visual Studio.Net is ''the milestone event for .Net becoming practical and real,'' said Mark Driver, a research director at Gartner. ''Since it's the workbench that is being used to deliver this stuff in the real world, it really does carry on its shoulders the success of Microsoft's e-business and Web services strategy.''

The tools simplify the process of building applications for the Web the way a calculator beats doing a complicated math problem on paper, said Mike Kass, product manager for the .Net developer platform. Instead of typing in code, developers can choose from a menu of drag-and-drop options.

Among the programmers who have already put the tools to use are Neil Chopra and Greg Hannum, seniors at Monte Vista High School in Danville. In an era of keen competition to get into good colleges, they took a grading program Chopra had created and made it accessible over the Web so that parents can check their kids' grades on the Internet, even using a mobile phone.

"As a traitor to all my fellow schoolmates, I do think it's a good idea," Hannum said jokingly Tuesday. He and Chopra were recruited to demonstrate the feature on stage with Gates.

A test version of Visual Studio was released last July, and Microsoft estimates it already has more than 3 million users. The price of Visual Studio .Net ranges from $550 for an upgraded version of the professional edition to $2,500 for a full package of the premium edition.

Its debut is sure to raise the stakes in the Web services race, said David Readerman, an analyst with Thomas Weisel Partners in San Francisco. More than 3 million developers are loyal to Sun's Java, and IBM is promoting its own alternative using Linux.

Microsoft's push into Web services as a growth strategy has not escaped notice of some antitrust regulators, including the state attorneys general still involved in a lawsuit against the company.
In a court filing last week, the states argued that Microsoft potentially has "the power to create, control and exploit the only effective and widely interoperable Web services network."

Microsoft disputes those allegations, saying it has cooperated on Web services standards.

The company has helped to create open standards such as XML for exchanging data across the Internet, but how well Web services eventually interoperate across various platforms remains to be seen, Readerman said. Microsoft and IBM cooperate on defining standards for writing Web services, but they implement them differently.

More than Microsoft

Microsoft's Web services applications are designed to run on machines using Microsoft's Windows, whereas Sun, IBM and others use a standard version of Java known as J2EE, that runs on many kinds of hardware and operating systems.

"The question is do you want to get locked into a single company as your only supplier when, in a capitalist economy, there are many different suppliers and you can protect your investments with a multi-company approach," said Scott Hebner, marketing director for IBM WebSphere.

Since most companies today have a mix of software and hardware from different vendors, Microsoft isn't likely to take over the Web services market if it sells tools that work only with its own platform, said Gartner's Driver.

"They want to be a large vendor, but they can only support the Windows platform," he said. "That leads to an inherent limitation."