So where's the Celestial Archi-tronics Angel?

I was delighted to attend the 5th GRI Global Conference in Amsterdam this week. It was an enormous pleasure. The GRI folk are gracious and welcoming hosts. Well organised, interesting and set in the unique charm of the city to boot …just 10 minutes bike ride from the centre of the city. I've attended professional conferences of all shapes and sizes but Sustainable Development ones are numero-uno!

Change is in the Air…

There were some mind-blowing announcements regarding considerable improvements in the overall design of the G-4 version to "GRI Standards". Almost scary, actually. For me the worry is that the technical design and architecture may trail too far behind the business requirements.

Customer confidence…

Naturally, with announcements of change, comes hesitation. For example, if you wish to buy a new smartphone but were told a new model of the phone will be on the market in a few months, you may hesitate before making your purchase. Organisations such as XBRL International had faced a similar issue; they were continually updating their versions to a point where reporting organisations were hesitating to adopt their standards. Therefore, in 2002, XBRL froze a baseline version, 2.1 and declared that any improvements would be modular or add-ons. In 2016 version 2.1 is still the baseline version.

Bedrock version…

The G4 concept needs to develop into becoming part of the bedrock of sustainable development reporting. A possible evolutionary path will be that Modules are designed to be plugged into a baseline version as downloadable applications. I'll illustrate this from the following perspective: Even if you own an older model BMW, everyone else still recognises what you have, because the organisation has baselined their look and feel and improvements are built onto a deep-rooted design. GRI appears to have done this already, but the marketing picture has to be clear and reassuring (even if a few technical details have to be tweaked beneath the bonnet).

The App Store…

This is the cue for GRI XBRL to boldly step out of the closet and make courageous moves to become, as the French say, «branchée». A GRI Standards XBRL reporting Module may easily become a downloadable SaaS App on the tablet or smartphone of the CEO of an SME who uses it to update his sustainability report, sitting out on the terrace of a coffeehouse, all in the XBRL language. Easily feasible, as long as the integrated business and technical requirements analyses have been performed properly beforehand by GRI.

Integration, homogenisation and delivery of data needs to be carefully considered, up front. All this needs to be taken into careful account in the business requirements phase – the 'who-what-where archi-tronics';)

The modularisation must be designed to rapidly adapt to a continually evolving 'marketscape'. A 'panvision' of delivery platforms and the way in which disclosures will be made must be considered and 'technosmithed' into the 'who-what-where archi-tronics'.

The Analysts...

Additionally, user friendly control and management of the technical complexities of the machine readable data must be built into the design, allowing savvy analyst types to visually develop functioning data models, and not have to Skype some honourable geek in Bangalore to do it on their behalf.

Glance under the hood…

In the G-4 XBRL world, Modules should be developed as Extensions to the baseline platform – after all that's what it's all about. However, a feasibility study should be done first, analysing the cost/performance benefits of the various Extension architecture options.

Complex Modules, calling for more sophisticated functionality may be developed using XBRL Linkbase Hypercubes as well as the Generic and Calculation Linkbases. Perhaps Modules may even be embedded into Generic or Definition Linkbases. Currently the GRI G-4 XBRL Taxonomies are void of all these goodies, but I think that may be just an attitude issue.

Transition…

There must be a careful and well thought-out transition plan from the existing G-4 XBRL Taxonomy to the new GRI Standards XBRL Taxonomy. Obviously we can't expect reporting organisations to wait on the side-lines until a new version of the Taxonomy is released. They must forge ahead with the existing Taxonomy with the reassurance that when the updates are established there will be a smooth migration of data. To ensure the release of a great GRI Standards Taxonomy, the process may be more complicated than expected.

Software vendor relations…

Without suitable control, inviting software vendors to propose solutions has its risks of course. It may engender the development of application silos with the interests of the individual developers, managing each.

GRI should invest time designing its own evolving, value-add technical architecture which will determine the outcome of vendor developed software. This will require a GRI technology champion to architect the desired set of tools and how they are managed (she'll be that 'Celestial Archi-tronics Angel').

Customer facing…

Marketing and communications will also play and important role, as stakeholders in the functionality of the software. The team must examine the bi-directional delivery of information carefully and dovetail it with the trending styles available in the market place.

Storage…

The reports will require a cloud based data warehouse onto which configuration management systems are integrated to manage all those authentic, certified reports. I was considering the blockchain algorithm to help with that. Has anyone out there used this to version certify docs? Ping me if you have…I could use some insights.

To speed up the administration of all the machine readable reports, GRI would have to have a suite of quality control, workflow management and certification-validation tools to manage large volumes of information.

Integrated Reporting…

A quick word about the information systems integration perspectives of "Triple Bottom Line Reporting", according to the GRI G-4 and IIRC frameworks. I checked that road out after seeing a PowerPoint design of the high-level architecture:) Its' called "Integrated Thinking"... for you uninformed geeks out there. Well, the bits n' bytes journey is like walking across the road in front of Shibuya Station, wearing a blindfold. That was a bit of a comedown from my point to view, because it's pretty cool stuff, potentially. It's just that the 'Celestial Archi-tronics Angel' needs to come along with her magic wand and touch the integrated thinkers on the head with it.

Open ecosystem…

The journey of tech people into the realm of GRI XBRL reporting software should be a fine and easy to digest experience. Bolt-on software libraries for e.g. disclosure tables generation, indexing tools and report creation environments should be easy available for simplified integration by value-add vendors. Even (analyst level) visual data-mapping tools for Taxonomy Extensions may be made available or APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) may be developed for Dashboard applications. End-to-end marketing and training for all of this may be available on Youtube (in Chinese and Hindi).

The excitement of change…

With change, one initially senses a wave of anxiety. But after reconsidering all the salient factors, that anxious energy transforms into the charge of exited optimism of new hopes and possibilities. Well it has for me anyway.

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