

Notes from Meetings with Unicon, Inc. CEO Ray Baker July 14 and 15, 2003, Fairfax, Virginia

Unicon CEO Ray Barker and Vice President, Marketing, Jim Layne, were in Fairfax, Virginia this week training Datatel staff on their Academus portal and course management system products. (They attended the meeting I had with Datatel, Inc.) I met with Ray Barker Monday before the meeting with Datatel, Inc., and again on Tuesday morning.

Mr. Barker was concerned about the higher education's perception of the future of uPortal now that the grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has terminated. We discussed possible models for the uPortal open source development for both support and further development.

There are several models for development. One is the Apache Software Foundation model where companies incorporating the software in their own products support the development effort. Based on my conversations with Apache Software Foundation founder Brian Behlendorf, sponsors viewed their contribution as less than the cost of their own development even though some firms were using the product and not contributing to the Foundation. Another is the MySQL Inc. that is now primarily funded by SAP AG to accelerate the development of the MySQL database management system. At its size, MySQL was profitable from revenue for support and commercial licenses. (MySQL must be licensed to be incorporated into a proprietary product. Apache Software can be incorporated into a product without a separate license or fee).

Mr. Barker would like for JA-SIG to continue the current development effort and evangelizing uPortal.

Justin Tilton joined the second meeting; Justin briefed Mr. Barker on the history of im+m's participation in the uPortal project, the working relationship with Interactive Business Solutions, and comments about the JA-SIG participants and their interests. He also provided history of the role of the Aviation Industry CBT Committee (AICC) and IMS Global Learning Consortium, Inc. in developing learning and training standards. (Several years ago im+m published a consolidated set of standards on an indexed CD-ROM that included standards of both organizations).

The discussion turned to next steps for uPortal. Both Justin and I said the focus would now be on applications—channels or portlets. Columbia University's CuCMS—which Justin thought was important for other projects—is an example. I said I would share with him a list of channels I prepared for Bernie Gleason.

If Unicon is going to provide uPortal product support, say on the model that Red Hat and others support Linux, I said it would be helpful to have an announcement that could be shared with others. This would provide an alternative to depending upon the developer community for support. (I have made this same suggestion to SCT).

We also suggested the Unicon uPortal training be expanded to include content providers as well as programmers and administrators. Following a suggestion from Debbie Smith, I mentioned he could offer training in conjunction with the JA-SIG Winter conference—either before or after the conference schedule itself. This would save travel expense for some attendees and likely would increase attendance at both.

At the close of the meeting, I suggested Mr. Barker should communicate directly with JA-SIG Chair David Koehler about plans for the future. Dave would welcome Mr. Barker's perspective and suggestions.