

Tools and Technology

CMSML: A Standard for Describing and Classifying Content Management Systems

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The number of content management systems is still growing strong. And with the trend of enterprise content management buy-outs and new players in the market, the complexity of these numerous content management systems increases. A means of describing and classifying content management systems would be helpful. This article gives the ins and outs of CMSML, a markup language for content management systems provided by CM Professionals.

How to find your way

For people who are looking for the right content management product, there are many reviews of tools available, some on paper, but most online. There are online overviews that provide a list of products with features and sometimes allow users to compare products, e.g. CMS Review with the Comparator Tool [1]. There are also in-depth reports about a selection of content management systems, such as those published on Tony Byrne's CMS Report [2]. And, AIIM has produced several maps of the ECM process, such as the ECM Puzzle Poster. [3]

Each tool is perhaps appropriate for getting a rough idea or a second opinion about a set of content management systems, but the main problem is that it's almost impossible to use a combination of these tools for combined 'advice' about the systems. That is because these online overviews, reports, and other tools lack a generic set of definitions, facets, and tool repository.

A helpful tool: CMSML

In 2003, some people [4] took the initiative of developing a public domain classification based on an XML Schema. This CMSML would help professionals to better understand the ins and outs of enterprise content management systems. CMSML is both XML and public domain because they wanted anyone to be able to use the information.

In 2004, Hartman Communicatie improved and expanded the XML Schema. This new CMSML was given back to CM Professionals [5] for further development at the 1st CM Summit, November 2004 in Boston.

The advantage of CMSML is the use of a certain 'controlled' vocabulary that is supported by an ontology. Furthermore CMSML is a faceted classification system, which means that people can select products based on their own characteristics or properties.

CMSML makes it possible to have one international database of content management products, which can be accessed through many websites all over the world. People can use the CMSML-related classification method to compare the systems more easily, e.g. for a short list. In the database, each product has its own detail page with many features filled in.

However, in its "Cautionary notes" the 2003 Gilbane Report on CMSML [6] already warned that CMSML and related tools cannot automatically choose "the right" CMS. It's a starting point for a CMS evaluation and selection process; at best it can provide you with a short list of possible systems..

Using CMSML

CM Professionals will provide an online overview of systems, based on CMSML. The form that vendors fill in is an output of the XML Schema. Every change in the XML Schema revolves in a change in the online form. The Schema is designed to be flexible and extensible for future changes, based on discussions from CM professionals and ideas from users and vendors.

The main advantage of a public domain XML Schema is that several websites can collaborate with it through syndication. Thus vendors will only have to fill in and update their product on one website; all other websites will automatically present the latest data.

For visitors the advantage is obvious, because they will only have to check one website to get all up-to-

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date information available. Of course, no average visitor has a need for an overview of all systems available world-wide. A selection based on features is very welcome here, e.g. systems available in their own region. Website publishers can predefine such selections but still provide more information if needed.

There are already some examples of CMSML-based overviews: CMS Review with the Comparator Tool and the Hartman Communicatie ECM Overview [7]. At the Hartman ECM Overview, every listed product is displayed with zero up to five 'stars' according to their specific features. In this case the criteria are based on the facets of editing, content management, document management, records management, workflow management, and information retrieval.

What's next?

Even after the second phase of improving the XML Schema, the work has not finished yet. In particular, the facets have to be revised and expanded. The first generation CMSML used the facets "creation, management, delivery, and lifecycle enhancement". We have to consider if the AIIM-facets "capture, manage, store, deliver, and preserve" need to be incorporated as well, as questioned by Bob Doyle [8].

For Enterprise Content Management Systems, the second CMSML uses the facets of editing, content management, document management, records management, workflow management, and information retrieval. But more facets need to be added, such as scalability, usability, security, interoperability. We need to develop criteria and heuristics to define these facets and thus describe and classify content management systems. These facets and criteria have to be discussed and developed in an international - and likely academic-oriented - discourse, for which CM Professionals is an excellent platform.

A next step would be the development of an international - and perhaps decentralized - CMS Lab in which content management products are tested according to these facets and criteria. Some initiatives are already there, e.g. the Washington iSchool CMS Evaluation Lab.

CM Professionals is already working on an ontology, which has a direct relation with the CMSML controlled vocabulary. And of course some facets of the CMSML will appear in the CM Pros Poster, based on

the AIIM Puzzle Poster and Bob Boiko's CM Possibilities Poster [9].

The CMSML has to syndicate and replicate with as many websites as possible, which needs consultants, vendors, website publishers and professionals to cooperate. This is a major effort the CM Pros CMSML Project has to accomplish.

Finally, the development of a more user-centered dialogue would help end users to find their way through the many facets, criteria and products. A user-centered dialogue is necessary because we cannot expect end users to have a mindset in which terms like records management, aggregation, native XML and such are common.

CMSML is - and must remain - a public domain, industry-wide, collaborative online effort to seek agreement on the core features and functions of a CMS. As a CM Pros Project, we will look for agreement from analysts, industry experts, vendors, and users, both inside and outside CM Professionals.

We will also encourage consultants to not only use the CMSML for themselves, but also to publish the CMSML-based overview feeds on their websites. Thus they can select the most appropriate systems for a short list together with their clients. Because it's not only the outcome of such a quest that's important but also the discussion about the required criteria. Without understanding the question you cannot understand the answer.

CMSML is in a second stage of development, but much work still has to be done. CM Professionals will discuss the further development of CMSML at the 2nd CM Summit on 11 April 2005 in San Francisco [10]. Everyone is invited to join the CM Summit!

After the Summit a White Paper will be published on the CM Professionals website [11] and the discussion will go on at the special CMSML mailing list [12].

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Summary

There are many methods to help people make the right choice about tools, such as advice from consultants, reports, and overviews of systems. CMSML is a markup language for describing and classifying content management systems. CMSML is now a project within CM Professionals, the content management community of practice (<http://www.cmprofessionals.org>).

Erik M. Hartman improved and expanded the CMSML and is now working within the CM Pros community on developing more facets and heuristics for classifying enterprise content management systems.

[12] The CMSML mailing list is at <http://lists.cmsml.org/mailman/listinfo/cmsml>.

References

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- [10] 2nd CM Professionals Summit, www.cmprofessionals.org/events/summit.html.
- [11] A special CMSML page will be published at the CM Pros website after the 2nd CM Pros Summit.