

Early Views on iManifest: ISV Expectations, Public Misconceptions

by Dan Burger

The results of those with knowledge and a little money *who act* are worth far more than the results of those with knowledge and much money *who remain idle*. I think that's an appropriate way to describe the current state of the iManifest U.S. initiative. The match has been struck. It just needs a little gasoline to light the bonfire.

There are more than a few who believe, and have spoken out, that fighting for the IBM i platform is somehow akin to fighting a house fire with a squirt gun. It's viewed as impeding progress and is, therefore, a cause for the backward and slow to catch on. This is the misconception that muddies the water. It evokes the AS/400 dinosaur theory, which would have you believe it's the only platform with laggards--an analyst term to describe those who don't subscribe to the best practices du jour. You can find "laggards" on every IT platform, and on every other type of technology and business process. Some deserve the worst connotation of the word and some are doing just fine with what they have. Yes, resources are often not used to their fullest extent. Sometimes that's the fault of the individual (why should I have to learn a new technology?), and sometimes the blame is the working environment (why should I fix what ain't broke?).

The iManifest, which is taking shape quite nicely in Japan and hoping to catch fire in EMEA (Europe, the Middle East, and Africa), and is now in the United States, is IT activism. It comes from a loyal customer base that is irate about the mediocrity of IBM i marketing and is fearful that the mediocrity will creep into research, development, and sales of an outstanding product.

The early efforts of iManifest rest entirely on the shoulders of the independent software vendors who are deeply invested in the platform. They depend on platform-specific marketing and continued investment from IBM. They are looking out for themselves, but they are also looking out for their customers, the organizations that count on this operating system and the applications to reliably run businesses. The situation has reached the point where the ISVs and the iManifest initiatives in various regions around the world have to build a program that IBM has failed to build itself. (Visit the iSociety Web page to see the ruins of IBM's last efforts to harness the loyalty of the user base.)

In last week's edition of *The Four Hundred*, Timothy Prickett Morgan talked with Jeff Olen, who has stepped up in a leadership role for the iManifest U.S. initiative. This week, we are giving the executives at ISVs that have made financial commitments to iManifest a chance to talk.

The ISVs have always had a contorted relationship with IBM. They have to do what's best for their own businesses and feather the IBM nest at the same time. Sometimes those two agendas are not in perfect alignment. Fear of saying too much or doing the wrong thing and ending up with a not so flattering note in the IBM corporate files is a worry for many ISVs, particularly the smaller ISVs that are trying to successfully follow the IBM roadmaps.

The iManifest has a bit of hard edge on it because it can be viewed as having to pick up the ball after IBM fumbled it.

Allen Hartley, owner of ProData Computer Services, is typical of the IBM i boosters. "We are going to be involved as much as we can," Hartley says. "The money side of it is just something we have to do. We have to promote this box. If the ISVs have to do this--if that's what it's going to come down to--we'll do it."

"I think iManifest will be bigger in the U.S. than anywhere else," Hartley continues. "There are a lot of people committed to this machine, but because it's such a good machine people have sat back and not worried about it. Now the idea has been presented that it might go away. People are ready to stand up and make sure the box continues. People are starting to come alive. I hope this is going to be a wake up call to IBM. I hope there will be enough people getting behind it that they will realize that more needs to be done to promote the box."

iManifest is early in the commitment stage. Awareness is rising, but that comes with a lot of early misconceptions about what it will look like, what its goals will be, and how it will be judged successful. The fact is nothing has been set in stone yet.

Although Olen is leading it out of the gate, there are no plans for him to be king or dictator or run this as a one-man show. In time, it will hopefully look a lot like iManifest Japan in terms of its broad scope of ISV involvement and its organizational committees that will shape the decision making process.

Shelli Peck, director of marketing at ProData, is the lead person involved in iManifest for that vendor.

"I plan to work with Jeff. I'm part of the iManifest U.S. LinkedIn group that is being used for communicating ideas," Peck says. "As things evolve, we'll see how much participation there is and eventually I expect that we'll convene meetings to establish goals and directives. It's all part of gathering momentum and figuring out the best plan."

Richard Voss, owner of DRV Technologies, jumped on board iManifest in the early going. "If you take a wait and see attitude nothing ever gets done," Voss says. Sizing up the future of iManifest, Voss says success won't be tied to a specific number of participants that makes or breaks the organization. "As long as we are increasing awareness--getting the brand out there to people outside the community--it will be a success."

Voss recognizes that some people are going to take the wait and see attitude. Some of that is a product of misunderstandings about the iManifest's goals and objectives.

"Some people have expressed concern about an idea that this is about buying one big ad in a publication like the *Wall Street Journal* and then everyone will go home," Voss says. "Personally, I believe we need some kind of marketing on an ongoing basis. If a one-and-done ad is all that results, I'd consider that a failure. Even though that would raise some awareness, and the goal is to increase awareness, I want this to be an ongoing thing."

He re-emphasized the point that iManifest U.S. is in the early stages. Particular plans have not been established. In his opinion, there will be an elected board that will handle decision-making questions in a democratic fashion. It's too early to jump to conclusions about what it will be and what the goals will be.

The most meaningful achievements that can be attained through the iManifest, says Eli Spitz, vice president of business development at Raz-Lee Security, will be IBM's re-adoption of this platform in terms of marketing efforts and focus so that "the current negative atmosphere regarding the platform can be change to a positive one." That will result in "more ISVs developing more applications for the platform and more companies buying these applications to run on the Power i."

Raz-Lee, along with DRV Technologies, ProData, and LANSA, are the first ISVs to make financial commitments to iManifest U.S. Of that group, LANSA has the most iManifest experience. Its involvement began with iManifest Japan and it has been instrumental in the EMEA efforts as well.

"iManifest is different in different regions around the world," says Steve Gapp, president of LANSA. "I think Japan is easily the most well formed and it truly has some legs on it. They have committees, sub-committees . . . they have all the tier one high-end vendors involved from the hardware people, the big resellers and ISVs. The media is intrinsically involved. IBM is involved. I think IBM has even put on an additional event at the request of iManifest, which has proved to have some impact in that part of the world."

Gapp notes that efforts in Japan have been led by high-end companies and that's not been the case in EMEA and America, where the small entrepreneurial ISVs are carrying the load. The excitement is great, he says, but iManifest U.S. would benefit from the financial support of bigger companies.

IBM Japan has committed some resources to various committees within iManifest, Gapp says, and it works with iManifest activities and requests.

"I would imagine if iManifest continues to grow and become a more positive force overall, then it would be in a position to get more traction with IBM and open the possibility of working together toward a consistent set of goals," he says. "I think iManifest will be seen as a positive influence by the folks at IBM and that IBM will be very supportive."

It's encouraging to hear vendors say that conversations with IBMers working on Power Systems i projects have been supportive of the iManifest effort, even though we've yet to hear anyone from Rochester publicly address the issue. I suspect that time is coming though. Not speaking is saying a lot. And no one is taking that to imply approval. If anything, it risks the impression that IBM has lost heart.