

Autodesk 360—PLM in the Cloud

CIMdata Commentary

Autodesk used the occasion of Autodesk University 2011 in Las Vegas on 29 November to introduce Autodesk 360, its Product Lifecycle Management (PLM) solution suite that has been foreshadowed by the “Everything Changes” campaign of 2011. Previous to Autodesk 360, Autodesk provided workgroup-level data management capabilities for its CAD products through its Vault offering. While Autodesk Vault is part of their new PLM solution suite, Autodesk 360 expands on those capabilities in significant ways.

In the past, Autodesk has eschewed PLM, claiming that it is much too difficult to implement and derive benefit from current offerings. This was heavily reinforced by CEO Carl Bass’ now famous anti-PLM rap, well known on YouTube. Reminded of this at the Autodesk 360 announcement Mr. Bass explained “We didn’t do PLM until we could do it right.” So, what has changed since then to influence Autodesk to enter the PLM fray? According to Mr. Bass and other Autodesk managers involved in the Autodesk 360 launch, the evolution of cloud computing, a careful regard for what users have been saying, and evolving business models have allowed Autodesk to refine how PLM capabilities are delivered in a way that overcomes many of the problems users have voiced about “traditional” PLM solutions and now allows PLM to be a realistic and beneficial option for their customers.

Stephen Bodner (Autodesk VP of Collaboration, Data, and Lifecycle Management) stated that “PLM is about a lot more than engineering” and thus needs to be supported for many types of workers who are not traditionally part of the product engineering process. In Autodesk’s view this distinguishes PLM from PDM (Product Data Management), justifying their delivery of Autodesk 360 as a suite of three separate, but supposedly seamlessly integrated tools. These are:

- Autodesk Vault, the existing workgroup CAD data management and change management product; their PDM solution. Vault is delivered as what they call an “on-premise” solution, not as a cloud solution.
- Autodesk Buzzsaw to support design collaboration among designers and partners, as it has for a number of years.
- Autodesk 360 Nexus provides all the rest of PLM beyond CAD data management. It is a cloud-based solution that Autodesk states is not a recreation of an older technology to work in a cloud environment, but a completely new cloud-based development.

This packaging fits with Autodesk’s contention that PDM and PLM are not intended for the same users, and therefore they don’t need to be deployed in the same tool.

A main capability of the PLM offering is support for managing workflows such as engineering change and product approvals. The workflows can be automated and provide stage gates. They also link managed data to work activities. Project management is built in and is enhanced by linking workflows directly to the project steps, automating and speeding up reporting of project activities. Compliance to regulatory rules is one example of a direct application of PLM. Autodesk customer Armour Medical made a presentation of how it has used Autodesk 360 for PLM to develop a compliance solution based on FDA rules and regulations.

To further expand the capabilities of Autodesk 360 Nexus, Autodesk is partnering with an Enterprise Application Integration platform provider to help create integrations to other enterprise solutions such as Enterprise Resource Planning, CAD, and other PLM solutions, as Mr. Bodner stated, “Making the value of PLM attainable.”

While pricing was not announced, Autodesk 360 Nexus will be provided as a subscription service that “provides access rather than ownership.” It will be sold and supported through Autodesk’s channel of VARs and resellers with additional support resources from service providers. Autodesk 360 should be available at the end of 1Q 2012.

Conclusions

Autodesk’s PLM offering is just at the beginning of its life, but they have already demonstrated substantial capabilities. We find it interesting and refreshing that Autodesk has announced two flavors of Autodesk 360: Autodesk 360 PLM for manufacturing companies and Autodesk 360 BIM for AEC users. They have joined a very small population of PLM solution providers that are catering directly to the specialized needs of companies that design complex facilities such as chemical plants and buildings, as well as those in the discreet manufacturing industries.

A challenge Autodesk will face is selling PLM through a VAR and reseller channel that has historically sold products that did not require consulting services to deploy. Certainly, some of the VARs and resellers have experience from selling other PLM solutions that they will be able to apply directly to Autodesk 360. The systems integrators with whom Autodesk is partnering will provide a valuable resource to support those resellers and VARs who do not have a history of dealing with the needs of PLM implementations.

Perhaps not “Everything Changes” for Autodesk customers, but a major change is that they certainly now have access to “native” PLM beyond CAD data management. And, for those who can embrace the cloud, Autodesk 360 Nexus presents a subscription-based offering that works with the rest of their Autodesk solutions. We look forward to Autodesk’s enhancements based on this first foray into the PLM space.

About CIMdata

CIMdata, an independent worldwide firm, provides strategic management consulting to maximize an enterprise’s ability to design and deliver innovative products and services through the application of Product Lifecycle Management (PLM). CIMdata provides world-class knowledge, expertise, and best-practice methods on PLM. CIMdata also offers research, subscription services, publications, and education through international conferences. To learn more about CIMdata’s services, visit our website at www.CIMdata.com or contact CIMdata at: 3909 Research Park Drive, Ann Arbor, MI 48108, USA. Tel: +1 (734) 668-9922. Fax: +1 (734) 668-1957; or at Oogststraat 20, 6004 CV Weert, The Netherlands, Tel: +31 (0) 495 533 666.