



What the Heck Is Netweaver?

Part I: Frequently Asked Questions About SAP's Technology Platform of the Future

By Axel Angeli, logosworld.com

Editor's Note: "Netweaver" has become one of those dreaded SAP® buzzwords that users are scratching their heads about. One thing we do know: whatever Netweaver is, it's a vital part of SAP's product strategy going forward. But it sure would be nice if we understood what Netweaver really is, so we gathered up all of our burning questions about Netweaver and fired them off to our resident mySAP® technical expert Axel Angeli. The result is Axel's first article on Netweaver, where he breaks down all of our questions and outlines the components of the Netweaver solution, such as the Web Application Server, the Exchange Infrastructure (XI), and Enterprise Portals. There's no way to cover all the complexities of SAP's "next generation" technical environment in just one article, but this compilation of frequently asked questions is a great first step.

Technical Overview: When talking about Netweaver, only one thing remains constant: lots of confusion about what Netweaver really is and what it means to SAP users. Is it a completely new product, or is it even several products combined? Does it come out of the box or will it have to be developed? Will Netweaver replace SAP R/3 completely? If so, when will this happen—now, or sometime in the future? Where is SAP heading with its technology? How do we upgrade to Netweaver? And what are the benefits? This article will tackle these questions and sort through the confusion. By the end, we'll have a much clearer idea about the Netweaver platform and how it should bring a new return on investment to SAP users.

What is Netweaver?

In a nutshell, Netweaver is:

A catch-all word for all the technical add-ons of mySAP

The term "Netweaver" has been established as the technical architecture for all the new or refurbished software components of SAP and mySAP. Hence, Netweaver is, above all, a common label for the *technology* that builds the foundation of SAP's new or refurbished mySAP products and the R/ releases starting from release 4.7. Any of these products shares an underlying development framework that is referred to as the Netweaver technology. So, when you hear about mySAP ERP (sometimes called R/3 5.0), or mySAP Business Suite (which includes mySAP ERP but also includes all the additional mySAP components such as mySAP CRM)—all of these products are supported by Netweaver technology. Netweaver is also the technical foundation for SAP's "xApps." xApps are sets of intelligent meta transactions that allow the execution of multiple transactions in a single workflow step.

A lot of hype to attract the market's attention

From a marketing point of view, SAP follows exactly the same strategy than Microsoft used to pursue when it introduced the Microsoft.NET framework. Both Microsoft and SAP coin an expression that keeps it deliberately vague to describe a concrete technology, and while the market tries to understand the consequences, Microsoft and SAP continue to shape their products in accordance with the market's expectations.



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New name: Netweaver = mySAP Technology

For a relief to the confusion, in early 2003, SAP chief product manager Peter Graf clarified that Netweaver is simply a new name for what existed before under the umbrella of mySAP Technology. So we shall put it in the easiest terms possible as well, and say:

- Netweaver = mySAP Technology

To clarify another source of confusion: SAP still retains the term mySAP, at least for a while, to label the Netweaver-powered SAP and "mySAP" application components like CRM and APO. The label "Netweaver" describes the framework built around and on top of the ABAP development platform; however, the term "mySAP Technology" has been taken out of the collection and given a new, all-encompassing name that reflects the prominent importance of the Netweaver development platform for the whole SAP product and service range.

From an engineer's viewpoint, whether SAP tags its products as mySAP or Netweaver is not relevant. What is essential is to know whether the product is running on the Netweaver platform (Web AS 6.x), on an older release of R/3, or completely on separate non-SAP technology as Business One does.

When will I need Netweaver? And will I have to get it eventually?

You will get Netweaver automatically when you upgrade to mySAP ERP (R/3 4.7 and beyond)

If you operate an SAP-centric IT infrastructure, you eventually will have no choice. With SAP Enterprise (same as SAP R/3 4.7), the borders between the traditional R/3 and Netweaver blur more and more. SAP Enterprise runs on the same technical engine as pure Netweaver components do. This engine is basically a pepped-up version of the traditional R/3 Basis kernel with its ABAP engine, which is now called Web AS. Essentially, R/3 ERP is a Netweaver application, and once you upgrade to mySAP Enterprise or mySAP ERP, then you will be running completely on Netweaver technology.

With SAP R/3 4.7, SAP started using a new nomenclature for naming the R/3 product line. First they tried to call the latest version of R/3, SAP Enterprise, but then decided to come up with the name SAP ERP for it. Basically, SAP ERP is not a newborn child but only the classic R/3 in a new robe. Hence, SAP Enterprise goes simultaneously under the names:

SAP Enterprise → R/3 4.7 → SAP ERP 1.0

The current release of SAP ERP is called SAP ERP 2.0 and is sometimes referred to by its internal technical name: SAP R/3 5.0. The SAP ERP is the flagship of the "mySAP Business Suite", which includes all the mySAP add-on components as well, such as APO, CRM, and SEM. All of these applications are now built on Netweaver technology as stand-alone application components.

Buy Netweaver stand-alone solutions

You can have Netweaver-based mySAP solutions completely independent of whatever SAP R/3 software you are already running, if any at all. They will run on their own server instances and communicate with your existing R/3 instances via RFC and HTTP. So you can run mySAP CRM regardless of whether you are running on 3.1 or 4.6, or whether you are running on R/3 at all. Obviously, this enables SAP to sell its mySAP product enhancements to non-R/3 customers and opens up new software sales markets.



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Netweaver SAP XI provides a powerful middleware solution which can be programmed in ABAP

If you have many individually-running server applications, or if you are working with widely-distributed applications, you may consider the option of introducing middleware software. If you are SAP-centric, then SAP XI may be a good and robust choice for a middleware product; however, if you are already running middleware software that you are familiar and satisfied with, there is no need for a change. SAP XI is the first of the Netweaver products that is truly independent from R/3. You will not need XI to continue using R/3 and XI is capable of orchestrating your IT infrastructure even if you do not run R/3.

With SAP XI, SAP is trying to get its share of the crowded and highly competitive market for middleware solutions. Middleware software is basically a piece of software that deploys itself as a message synchronization system. When messages are received by the middleware component, they are processed either by a set of rules or by programs that can be written and adapted by the owner of the middleware. The difference between these products is mainly the performance and the ease of programming.

Typical representatives and main contenders in this area are IBM Websphere®/MQseries, Webmethods, and Microsoft BIZTALK. In terms of performance, nothing even comes close to IBM's Websphere, which has evolved over decades from the classical JES of the seventies to the MQseries product which was introduced in 1992. I mention Webmethods as it is identical with the SAP Business Connector, which is now replaced by Netweaver XI.

The disadvantages of products like Websphere/MQ or Webmethods are their awkward ways to program and customize. MQ was originally designed as an application-programming interface (API) that was meant to be used as a program library for another programming environment, e.g., C++. Now MQ is mainly marketed together with IBM's Websphere Application Server (WAS) for one main programming environment: Java. Java is anything but easy to program and the reliability, readability, and performance of Java programs are questionable.

If message transformation with a high or floating number of programmed algorithms is the main demand, then the ease of ABAP is a clear plus for XI. Only if message throughput for sending a phenomenal amount of messages is essential (for example, if you're a SPAMmer☺), then reason may point in the direction of MQ—although the classical IBM argument may also be injected here: "Performance problems? Buy a bigger machine!"

If you want to upgrade your FI and HR modules separately

One major benefit of mySAP ERP is that, thanks to the Netweaver architecture, the software of the individual business area elements now have a higher degree of modularization. This means that changing code in one business area is now much less likely to interfere with coding in another part. SAP ERP will also allow users to license only the business modules of R/3 that you need, instead of installing the full suite. So, if you want to be able to upgrade your HR module without upgrading FI, then Netweaver is for you.

If you want to use xApps to create meta transactions and automate repeating complex processes

Talking about xApps in detail would probably take the space of another white paper, but here's the quick version: "xApps" are fancy names for what we used to call Meta-Transactions. An xApp is a program that integrates existing applications and puts a common surface over them. An xApp takes data from one application, processes the data, and sends the data to another application for further processing. In a sense, an xApp can be seen as a sophisticated version of a data entry macro to facilitate recurring tasks.



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Imagine an application that automates several steps in a supply chain. Imagine a scenario in a supply chain management: whenever a sales order arrives, you want to reserve the required materials, send a purchase order to every service provider that is needed to produce the goods, and replicate the bill of material to a legacy warehouse software system. Traditionally, this process could require many manual steps. An xApp "meta transaction" will automate all these steps.

Generally, SAP defines xApps as "cross-functional," platform-independent applications that users and partners can build upon. This means that if one SAP user develops a supply chain xApp such as the one described above, then another SAP user can take this from SAP's library of xApps and use it or customize it further.

Netweaver should lower your total cost of ownership

Running application components individually allows you to more easily control their behavior. Changes in one module will no longer tamper with another application, e.g., if you make a modification in the sales order component, you should no longer risk harming the MM module at the same time. This will normally lead to lower maintenance costs. As long as the costs of training your staff on Netweaver are controlled, Netweaver should consequently reduce your cost of ownership.

How tough is the upgrade? And what are the upgrade options?

There is no SAP upgrade quite like upgrading to NetWeaver

Netweaver is mainly a name for products that are developed on the SAP Web AS. And starting with release 4.7 (R/3 Enterprise), the R/3 kernel is identical with the Web AS. Therefore, upgrading to R/3 Enterprise or mySAP ERP will bring you all the benefits of the Netweaver infrastructure. Specifically, this upgrade adds the HTTP support to the SAP kernel—most of the other Web AS goodies existed in R/3 4.6C already.

Upgrade from SAP 4.6 on the level of hot packages

The most difficult upgrade for R/3 is to make the leap from releases 3.x to 4.x, or to upgrade from a release less than 4.6 to 4.6 or higher. Between 3.x and 4.x, the SAP kernel had been expanded and revamped significantly, which can cause problems when your 3.x system has a lot of custom development.

Release 4.6 made a large number of cosmetic changes, and produced a lot of trouble by changing the traditional GUI design and ignoring compatibility to previous releases for GUI menu features. This also necessitated a lot of manual adjustments if you designed your own menu structures in releases before 4.6. The cost of these adjustments and the cost of retraining the SAP users without seeing an appropriate benefit can add up to a lot of money; these are the major causes for the numerous negative statements and warnings about upgrading to 4.6 or higher. However, if you are running 4.6 already, these things are behind you, and you are now past the heavy seas. Technically, an upgrade from 4.6 to anything else will be on the level of applying some major hot packages. You may have problems in the cases where you made some unlucky changes to the SAP standard modules, but otherwise, you will not see too many changes.



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The difference between SAP Enterprise and mySAP ERP with respect to upgrade issues is marginal. ERP differs mainly from Enterprise by adding new functionality as modular components, while leaving the remaining R/3 sections intact. The mySAP ERP is the latest and, most likely, the final release of R/3. Future developments will be added as new plug-in modules. So it is a safe advice: if you're ready to upgrade, and you are trying to decide between Enterprise or mySAP ERP, then go for the latest version, and this is mySAP ERP. It should be noted that in recent public statements, SAP executives have agreed with this recommendation. Figure 1 illustrates the technical evolution of the R/3 architecture.

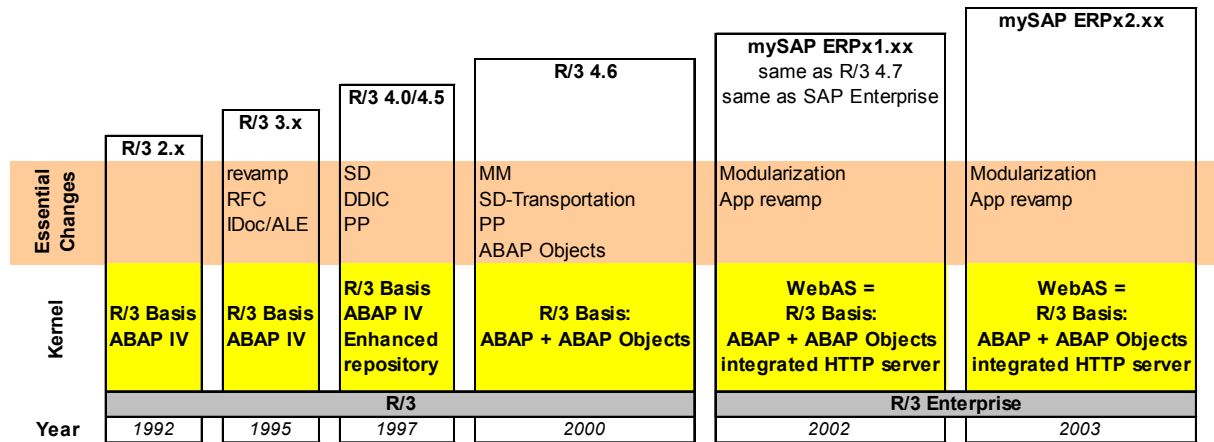


Figure 1: Evolution of SAP R/3 from 2.x to SAP R/3 Enterprise and ERP

The Technical Aspects of Netweaver

Let's look at some of the key characteristics of the Netweaver technical architecture:

Individual software components cooperate via a network

In the technical sense, SAP Netweaver stands for a series of software components that were designed to work seamlessly with each other. As a significant characteristic, all Netweaver components are open in terms of connectivity with external products. This is what is meant by the name Netweaver—it's an open "Net" architecture that "weaves" together individually-designed components and makes them cooperate by means of a loosely connected network.

Communication via RFC and HTTP

The Netweaver components can communicate in two ways: via SAP's traditional variation of IBM's CPIC protocol – the RFC (Remote Function Call), and via the Internet's most popular text-based protocol, HTTP.

Netweaver components need not be developed on the Web AS platform

At the core of the Netweaver solution is the Web Application Server, or Web AS, development environment. As described in my earlier SAPtips white papers in much detail, the Web AS is the classical R/3 Basis kernel with an ABAP engine and enhanced HTTP support. Therefore, when you're developing Netweaver components and making customizations, you can benefit from the



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world's most robust ERP technology—but you are by no means limited to using Web AS for your Netweaver development projects.

This is true in two ways: you can develop a Netweaver application on top of the Web AS, or you can develop in a J2EE or a .NET environment instead. Designed as a completely open standard, all Netweaver components can communicate with low impedance with any other modern software component. With the long established RFC protocol, SAP allows any other software component to call its own library function (all functions modules that are marked as RFC-enabled, especially all BAPIs). To make “netweaving” via RFC easy to everyone, SAP provides for interface libraries that make the remote computer appear just like another R/3 system embedded in your network. The RFC interface libraries are available for nearly all environments that SAP R/3 runs on, in particular for Windows (librfc32.dll, .NET connector), Java (Java connector) and also for CPIC environments (R/2, IBM z/OS) or IBM AS/400 (now: iSeries).

Indeed, SAP demonstrates how this works through its own J2EE engine, delivered as an add-on for release Web AS 6.20 and then named Web AS 6.30 (no productive release at this time, shipped to ramp-up customers, only). The SAP J2EE engine runs as a bolt-on to the ABAP Web AS and communicates simply via the Java Connector (JCo) with its parent system.

Netweaver can call any COM component, e.g., EXCEL

On the other hand, using Netweaver, SAP can call any Microsoft COM or Microsoft.NET component, just as transparently as it would call another ABAP function module. This allows for the reusing of the full functionality of an existing PC application from within an ABAP program. The SAP Business Warehouse (SAP Netweaver BW) is completely designed around this feature: while SAP controls the data analysis features, all presentation is done through Microsoft Excel.

Netweaver is an open development platform for enterprise developments

Netweaver is the embracing name for SAP's vision of distributed computing for enterprises. Fundamentally, Netweaver is a suite of tools that helps a developer to program solutions for enterprise needs. The basic idea is that instead of packing the highly diversified functionalities needed in an enterprise into one software module, the applications should run on communicating but individually running servers and virtual machines. Applications that have been developed and are executed on separate application servers can now be seamlessly interwoven via your network as if the applications were run as a single integrated suite.

Netweaver as first among equals in a complex IT infrastructure

One of the key objectives of SAP Netweaver is to be fully open for integration in an existing IT infrastructure. With the SAP Enterprise (which is actually SAP R/3 4.7) and now, with mySAP Business Suite, SAP wants to play the lead role of *primus inter pares* – first among equals – while allowing seamless integration into any existing IT network. This also means that SAP is not necessarily the focal system of an enterprise. It may well serve as a pure back office server while the internal communication is handled by high performance message queuing systems like IBM's Websphere/MQ, which is the latest incarnation of IBM MQ-Series and the old JES/2.

With mySAP ERP, SAP made a big step forward getting R/3 sorted into truly modular components. But with respect to compatibility and the complexity of the existing software, the modularization of software as complex as R/3 has naturally taken place gradually and with many underlying technical constraints. But SAP has a greater ambition in store: at press time, new intelligence from SAP Walldorf informs us that they are mobilizing their troops for an outrageous project named *Vienna*. The ambition of *Vienna* is to fully rewrite all the business components of



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R/3 as truly modular components. The way I like to put it is that currently there is R/3 (or mySAP ERP) and the rest of the mySAP components. At this point, R/3 is one hybrid component with increased capacity for modularization with each new release. SAP ERP is one major milestone in this process. *Vienna* will take the ultimate step and divide R/3 into completely separate pieces.

To see the full SAP product line for 2004, [see Figure 2 in the appendix](#) to this white paper.

The Netweaver Building Blocks

SAP Netweaver comes in three different layers:

The SAP Web Application Server development framework

The SAP Web AS, plus the above-mentioned SAP Exchange Infrastructure (XI), builds the foundation of what may be understood as SAP Netweaver Technology. As we've said, SAP Netweaver Web AS is the traditional and bullet-proof ABAP engine and R/3 kernel, with added support for HTTP and Web services (hence the name: Web Application Server).

The SAP integration components (SAP XI and SAP EP)

- SAP Enterprise Portal (SAP EP)

The Enterprise Portal provides a common entry point to all software applications of an enterprise, allowing single sign on and a common look-and-feel for the enterprise user. Portals are in fact everywhere. Every vendor wants to present its own portal, because the vendor that controls the gate can also present best its own products—witness the grandfather of the portals: Yahoo!. There are portals from many suppliers, including IBM and Oracle. Their main contender to Enterprise Portals is actually a generically-designed Web gate based on Microsoft Windows and Exchange Server components.

- The SAP Exchange Infrastructure (SAP XI) middleware

As previously noted, SAP XI is traditional middleware: a sophisticated workflow engine that receives messages from a sender, processes and converts the messages, determines the next receiver, and redistributes the message according to pre-defined intelligent rules.

SAP XI extends the possibilities of the built-in workflow mechanism of R/3 and it replaces the former SAP Business Connector, which was a licensed OEM version of WebMethods. SAP Business Connector will only be supported for existing uses, but will no longer be used for new applications. The existing workflow in R/3 will continue to exist (for techies: always triggered via explicit events and the functions SWE_EVENT_CREATE_EVENT or CHANGEDOCUMENT_CLOSE), but for complex or performance critical tasks, including EDI transformations, a switch to SAP XI may be a wise decision.

Third party Netweaver developments and mySAP components

This is the really new part of the Netweaver strategy: now there are applications that have been developed on top of the robust ABAP kernel that run in their own insulated environment and communicate with other applications via well-defined and decoupled interfaces.



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For example, I am currently managing the development of production line controller software that runs completely on SAP Web AS 6.30 and is written in ABAP. It controls the start and stop of production orders, manages the goods entries from production, issues goods from the stock, and receives information from many different external devices, mostly addressed via RS-232 interfaces directly from ABAP. This program continuously exchanges information with standard R/3 via ALE and sends feedback to external devices. It was meant as a prototypal application to demonstrate the ability to use Web AS as a development platform for production line applications.

For more topical news on third-party Netweaver components, visit <http://netweaver-guru.com>.

SAP Web Application Server (Web AS)

Web AS, or Web Application Server, is the heart of the Netweaver technology platform. Let's take a closer look at what Web AS is all about.

SAP Web AS is the programming platform of SAP

Much confusion comes from the word "Web" as part of the name of the Web AS. This gives the impression that this product was designed for the Internet and should primarily operate as a server for World Wide Web applications. While you may do this with Web AS, it remains one feature out of many. In technical terms, all that was needed to make a "Web AS" out of the core R/3 kernel was to add the intrinsic support of the HTTP protocol to the kernel. Until that point, SAP supported the CPIC-based RFC-protocol as the only communication protocol for data exchange with satellite systems. With the emergence of HTTP as the ubiquitous protocol for Internet and Intranet communication, SAP was forced to act.

The history behind this goes as follows: Originally SAP tried to develop a competitive Web server that supported ABAP as scripting language. Every modern Web server supports such a scripting language, e.g., the Microsoft Internet Information Server (IIS) comes ready with Visual Basic Script and Javascript support, and the Apache Web servers implement a support framework for server-side Java. Given the large community of ABAP developers, a Web server that supports ABAP was correctly seen as an advantage. Finally, someone found out that the easiest way was to add the HTTP protocol to the R/3 kernel as an alternative to RFC. J2EE is a bolt-on to the ABAP Web AS.

In order to attract the attention of the emerging and growing Java developer community, SAP made some effort to build its own Java enterprise application server platform. With Web AS 6.20, SAP delivers its own refurbished J2EE engine that can run directly on the same box as your Web AS 6.20 instance. However, J2EE is not an integral part of the whole Web AS system. It runs in parallel as an extra service, and communicates with the master instance via the SAP Java connector. There is nothing to criticize here from a technical perspective, but you can achieve the same goal with any other J2EE engine of your choice.

Web AS is open for any technology that can make HTTP or RFC calls, e.g., Microsoft.NET

Netweaver also integrates seamlessly with Microsoft.NET development. Microsoft.NET communicates with Netweaver in the same manner as J2EE does; only it uses the Microsoft.NET connector in place of the Java Connector (JCo). Actual communication is done via the RFC protocol. Both the JCo and Microsoft.NET connector are, however, mere libraries that provide an easy-to-use programming interface for using RFC. The alternative to using RFC is to communicate via the HTTP protocol, which is part of the kernel of both Netweaver and Microsoft.NET.



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If you're interested in more detail on the Web Application Server and how it supports SAP Web Services, check out my white papers on these topics in the SAPtips online document library, in the Netweaver and Web AS section.

What Is My Benefit from Netweaver?

After some years of indecisiveness, with the Netweaver initiative, SAP has solidified its position as the "thought leader" in the new, Internet-enabled world of enterprise computing. Ironically, SAP was only able to accomplish this when they remembered their own strengths. With Netweaver, SAP brings you the following:

- The Web AS allows you to use the SAP R/3 kernel as an open development framework for your own dedicated application and product developments.

This was also possible with "old" R/3, but you had to buy a license for the entire R/3 suite, even if you did not use the application-area modules.

- Netweaver commits SAP to remaining an open system, designed to allow integration via RFC and HTTP in a "heterogeneous" landscape of SAP and non-SAP components.
- Netweaver finally fulfills the old promise of putting the application areas into insulated modules that can be added or removed from the kernel as needed without requiring an upgrade of the entire application suite.

Reduced Total Cost of Ownership (TCO)

The guaranteed openness of Netweaver will eventually reduce the total cost of ownership of your whole IT infrastructure. Instead of rewriting all your applications to allow 100% automation, you now can leave many legacy applications as they are and allow them to communicate with your central ERP applications. Although some of this may have been possible with previous versions of R/3, SAP has now made a full commitment to supporting openness and integration efforts. The end result will be cost savings and increased productivity.

The modularization of Netweaver allows you to license exactly those application functions that you actually need. Modification in one area will affect the behavior of other modules to a lesser degree and with less likelihood. Finally, you can now run the individual applications on separate R/3 instances and even separate hardware boxes, which gives you the possibility to delegate the responsibility for the application area to the respective department and business-area owner.

These benefits lead to a fair presumption: that, over time, the relative total cost of ownership (TCO) of your whole IT investment can be significantly reduced. After the marketing disaster with the changes in release 4.6 that cost companies a lot of money during an upgrade for adapting things that brought no benefit and let the upgrade costs soar dramatically, it appears that SAP is now willing and able to deliver true and topical value. This new return on investment will not be found in reducing the license costs for SAP, but in optimizing your global IT infrastructure and allowing you to reuse existing applications, mainly the non-SAP specialty applications that are tailored for your business needs, putting the days of wide-scale, "enforced" reengineering of software behind you. From 4.7 onward, you will be able to enjoy the benefits of the Internet-friendly Netweaver architecture without having to frequently upgrade your whole application suite.



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Summary

We started this article in a bit of a fog, asking ourselves, "What the heck is Netweaver?" Hopefully this article has cleared out this mist by detailing the Netweaver architecture and its potential benefits. We have also tackled the question of how you get access to Netweaver technology and when a company should consider a "Netweaver upgrade." We have also outlined the specific Netweaver components and showed how this "open" architecture allows development using either classic ABAP techniques or working in a non-SAP environment like J2EE or .NET.

Netweaver represents a significant step in SAP's technical evolution, and it does take some time and effort to get a handle on the many applications of this new technology. But it is good to remember that in the most basic sense, Netweaver, formerly known as mySAP Technology, is just a common brand name for products that are specifically developed on a clean and naked SAP Web Application Server instance. Web AS is the successor and logical evolution of the well-established and project-proven R/3 Basis kernel, with its reliable and outstanding ABAP engine that allows for quicker and more reliable development of modular components for ERP use.

Current SAP-delivered Netweaver solutions are the SAP Exchange Infrastructure, a powerful middleware solution, the SAP Enterprise Portal, and the SAP Business Warehouse. The components of the SAP Business Suite are also built on the Web AS and are currently marketed with the label mySAP. Thus, the classical R/3 continues to exist under the new fancy names SAP Enterprise and mySAP ERP, the latter being SAP Enterprise plus a number of new modular components. Upgrading from 4.6 to ERP should be an easy task, although upgrading directly to mySAP ERP from pre-4.6 releases will involve dealing with the main difficulties in adapting the massive changes introduced in R/3 4.6. For developers, there is good reason to consider Web AS seriously as the development framework of the future. For the typical R/3 project owner, there is only one good piece of advice: upgrade to mySAP ERP as soon as possible.

Axel welcomes reader questions about Netweaver and he'll continue to address aspects of Netweaver development in upcoming editions of SAPtips.

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APPENDIX:

SAP Product Line, 2004

SAP mySAP and Netweaver Applications 2004

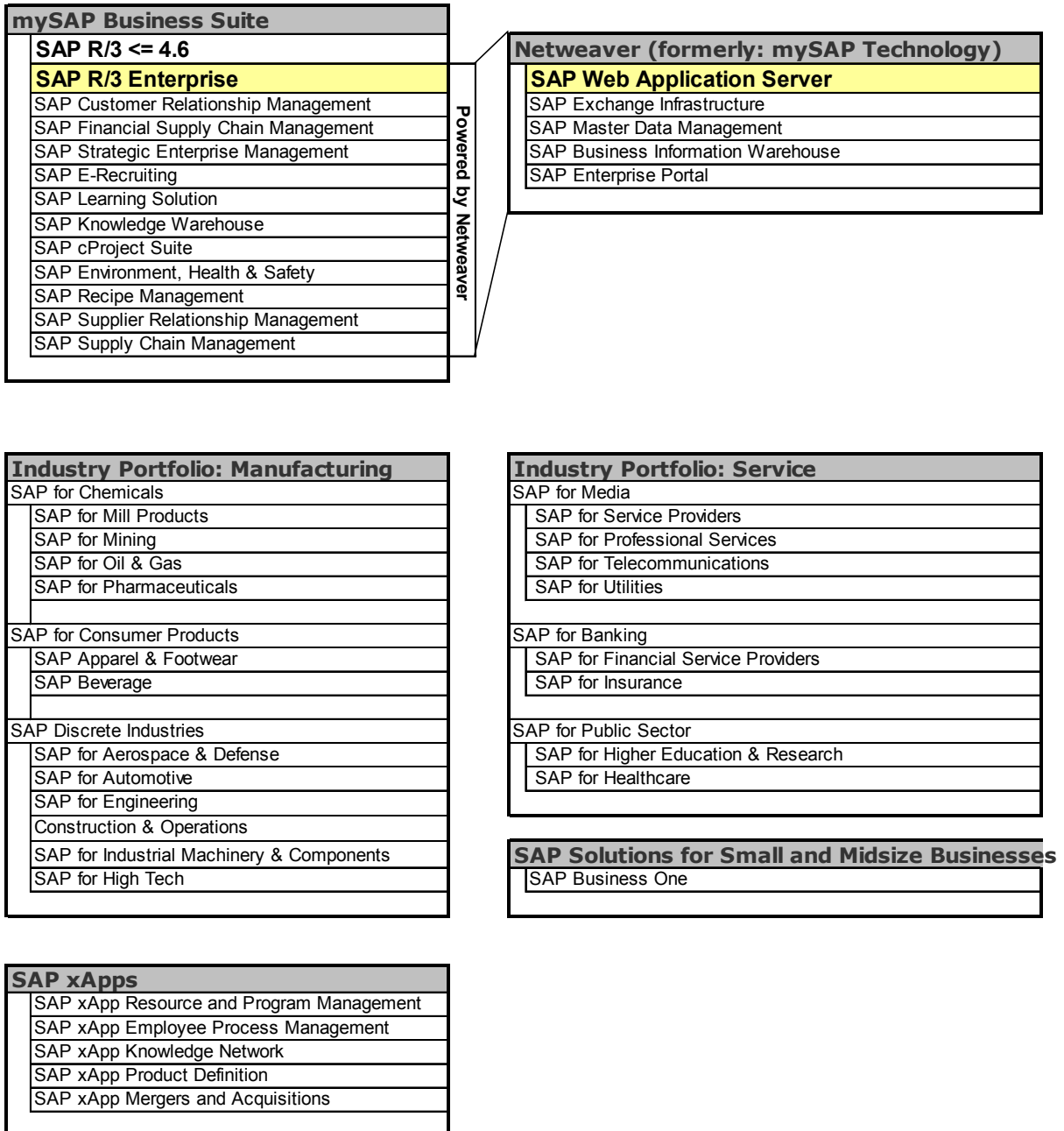


Figure 2: SAP's Application Portfolio for 2004
[Return](#)



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