Multidimensional Matchmaking for Electronic Markets

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Abstract

Matchmaking is the process of mediating demand and supply in markets based on profile information. In electronic marketplaces and in negotiations matchmaking plays a key role. The issue is to find the most appropriate agent for a task, the best bid in a multiattribute auction or the best present good for a request. In most real-world markets multidimensional matchmaking is required, i.e., the ability to combine different dimensions and sub dimensions of decision-making to define an over all relevance. This task requires the interplay of multiple matchmaking algorithms. Another central aspect is the possibility to design relevance computation processes for multiattribute objects easily. The realization of this issue makes multidimensional matchmaking processes to be easily integrated into industrial marketplace solutions. The work described in this paper aims on general multidimensional matchmaking objectives. These matchmaking objectives are implemented and deployed for industrial applications. The main contributions of this paper are (i) the definition of multidimensional matchmaking in general (ii) an implementation of configurable multidimensional matchmaking as a application dependent EJB component which is configurable using XML, (iii) the definition and implementation of different relevance (i.e. distance) functions for general usage and specific domains (iv) the description of a process guiding application developers to design matchmaking applications (enterprise java beans) (v) a report on experiences deploying the EJB matchmaker for the human resource area within a large-scale agent-based software.

Keywords: Market-based Coordination Mechanisms, Multidimensional Matchmaking, Relevance Computation

1 Introduction

Electronic markets are massively gaining importance in past few years. This tendency is mainly driven by the rise of electronic commerce. The deployment possibilities of electronic markets range from goods to contracts over all kind of objects which can be described in an electronic way. In next-generation electronic markets autonomous agents are likely to play an important role (see also [Müller and Pischel, 1999]).

An electronic market is based on the assumption that there are clear and well defined measures which allow to qualify an item with respect to another item. In general this is not the case. Most kinds of items traded on electronic markets are homogeneous items whose only negotiable factors are quantity and price. The huge majority of items which are candidates to be traded on electronic marketplaces are items which have negotiable properties that are not measurable in figures or a discrete structure but are have to be measured in non numeric continuous values or even complex documents containing both, figures and continuous, describing values. One crucial task in electronic markets is to provide mechanisms which allow to find the best fitting counterparts for a negotiation. In general this should be an ordered list of possible counterparts which is descending in quality of the respective starting basis. In case of a homogeneous item e.g. a stock, a price and quantity information is easy to qualify with respect to the own position. This is different when dealing with heterogeneous items like e.g. a human resource market does.

After the best fitting counterparts are found negotiation starts. In a negotiation the same problem rises again. If attributes are negotiated whose comparison is non trivial, elaborated measures must be defined to compute a relevance. In the phase where counterparts are distinguished this is a non-recurring task in which the relevance of each possible counterpart towards the own position is determined once, whereas in a negotiation every bid or iteration of the bidder must be judged with respect to the opposite position.

Consequently functions to judge relevance between a request and an offer must be supported which meet the following desiderata:

- Take as input a starting point description format which is possibly complex (i.e. contains several dimensions and sub-dimensions for specification).
- Provide mechanisms (relevance functions) to compute the relevance of instances of this format towards the other position.
- Provide different (possibly domain specific defined) description formats for the requester and the provider side.
- Provide a mapping from the requester description format to the provider description format which explains how relevance is computed.
- Evaluate efficiently in order to support decisions which are similar to how a specialist would decide.

In this paper we refer to a research project in which we focussed on the topic of matchmaking as a coordination mechanism in the selection phase of a negotiation in an elelctronic market. In Section 2 we focus on the objectives for matchmaking in general. In Section 3 we introduce the GRAPPA matchmaking framework. Section 4 gives an overview on the implementation of GRAPPA (Generic Request Architecture for Passive Provider Agents) which is a generic EJB-based Matchmaker based on XML data structures. Section 5 briefly summarizes the application of GRAPPA in the Human Resource Domain. The project called HrNetAgent is a large-scale agent-based software prototype for matchmaking between vacant positions and applicants. In Section 6 we provide an evaluation of the matchmaking approach made in the HrNetAgent Project. In Section 7 we conclude and describe issues of further research and application.

2 Matchmaking objectives

Matchmaking is not only a key task in multi-agent systems, it is also a crucial function in marketplaces and electronic negotiations. The provider who will enable the most effective matches between demand and supply will gain a competitive advantage and increase the acceptance and popularity of their marketplaces.

2.1 Definition

We understand matchmaking as a function which accepts as input a set of offers (candidate profiles) and a request (centroid profile) and provides as output a ranked list of the *k* best offers with respect to the request. Each element of the list provides an over all relevance of the offer towards the request. This relevance is computed form the distances obtained in the subdimensions of the profiles. In Section 3 we will explain this process in more detail. Each centroid profile is wrapped by an agent. Candidates can provide their profiles either by defining a single agent which carries its profile or by selecting an agent which wraps a larger amount of candidate profiles stored in a database. Thus, matchmaking can be regarded as a *k-nearest neighbors problem*: in an n-dimensional vector space, the k nearest neighbors to a given profile (represented as a point in that vector space) need to be computed. This problem is well understood in theory and solutions are known e.g., from Information Retrieval [Salton, 1989]. However, the requirements stated in Section 1 turn the development of generic solutions to this problem into a challenge.

2.2 Related Work

In this section we will present some work done by different groups which concerns matchmaking among profiles which are carried by autonomous agents. These profiles are mostly refered to as *Agent Service Descriptions*. Kuokka and Harada [Kuokka and Harada, 1996] considered matchmaking in the context of emerging information integration technologies, where potential providers and requesters send messages describing their capabilities and needs of information (or goods). They presented two matchmakers: COINS (COmmon INterest Seeker), which is based on free text matchmaking using a distance measure from information retrieval (Salton [Salton, 1989]), and SHADE (SHared DEpendency Engineering), which uses a subset of KIF (Knowledge Interchange Format) and a structured logic text representation called MAX. While COINS aimed at e-commerce, SHADE aimed at the engineering domain.

Complementing the theoretical work in [Decker et. al., 1997], Sycara and coworkers addressed the matchmaking problem in practice. They developed and implemented the LARKS matchmaker (LAnguage for Advertisement and Request for Knowledge Sharing) described in [Sycara and Klusch, 1998]. In LARKS, the matchmaking process runs through three major steps: (1) Context matching, (2) syntactical matching, and (3) semantic matching. Step 2 is divided into a comparison of profiles, a similarity matching, and a signature matching. Compared to previous approaches, LARKS provides higher expressiveness for service descriptions. Like those, however, LARKS has a static scheme for service descriptions, which restricts its application to agents that comply with this fixed description format.

In the context of electronic auctions, Weinstein and Birmingham [Weinstein and Birmingham, 1997] introduce a service classification agent which has meta knowledge and access to nested ontologies. This agent dynamically generates unique agent and auction descriptions which classify an agent's services and auction subjects, respectively. A requester obtains from it the name of the best auction to its needs.

In IMPACT [Subrahmanian et. al., 2000], so called Yellow Pages Servers play the role of matchmaker agents. Offers and requests are described in a simple data structure which represents a service by a verb and one or two nouns (e.g., *sell:car*, *create:plan(flight)*). The matchmaking process computes the similarity of descriptions from shortest paths in directed acyclic graphs that are built over

the sets of verbs and nouns, respectively, where edges have weights reflecting their distance.

Our approach differs from these systems in various respects:

- The definition of the demand and supply profiles can be can be flexibly adapted to enable a wide range of applications.
- Our model does not enforce a specific matchmaking method. Instead, arbitrary (possibly nested) description schemes can be defined from basic types using various forms of aggregation such as lists, sets, or records, and linked with suitable distance functions in a flexible way.
- Existing multi-stage matchmaking approaches measure similarity in several steps subsequently and classify the matching object after applying different matchmaking methods in a sequence. In contrast, our approach clusters the attributes of demand and supply profiles into clusters and computes local subdistances for these clusters "in parallel", before combining them to a single global distance.
- GRAPPA uses XML to describe supply and demand profiles schemas, and thus can be easily applied to a range of existing and future data repositories. Also, future extensions of GRAPPA may take advantage of tools for XML.
- GRAPPA provides an open framework to incorporate new matchmaking algorithms and to reuse them within industrial matchmaking solutions.

3 The GRAPPA Matchmaking Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the GRAPPA matchmaking framework. In [Eiter et. al., 2001; Veit et. al., 2001] we consider the multidimensionality of matchmaking in greater detail.

It consists of three major parts. Its core is the *matchmaking engine* described in Section 3.1. It is complemented by the *matchmaking library* (Section 3.2) and the *matchmaking toolkit* (Section 3.3).

3.1 GRAPPA Matchmaking Engine

The matchmaking engine accepts a set of supply profiles (candidate instances) and a demand profile as input. The supply profiles which have to be provided as instances of the matchmakers candidate class are either stored in the matchmakers service repository or – in case the matchmaker does not keep a service repository – retrieved from different data sources. The request which has to be provided as an instance of the matchmakers centroid class is matched against each of the candidate instances.

The candidate structure as well as the centroid structure are multidimensional. They consist of complex types constructed from a domain specific set of basic types under application of four complex type constructors: list, array, record and set. The overall distance, a real value between 0 and 1, is obtained by recursively computing the distance values for different profile sub-types, as

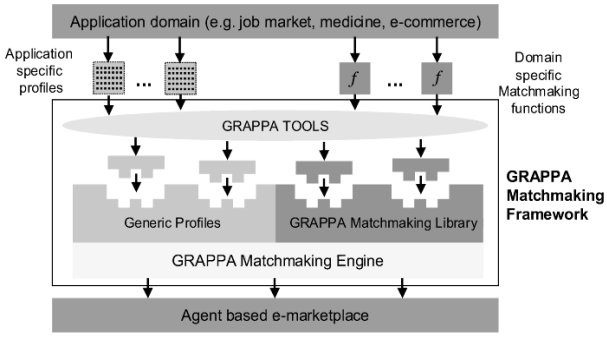


Figure 1. GRAPPA Matchmaking Framework

shown in the example in section 4, and propagating them upwards to compute the values for their parents (see Section 3.2 as well as [Eiter et. al., 2001; Veit et. al., 2001] for details).

For the basic types (the atomic attributes of the centroid and the candidate), the specific distance function for the particular type is applied and the result is propagated upwards.

Then, at the next higher level, all basic distances between the atomic types in this level are merged to one distance value for this complex type under application of aggregate functions. For in depth discussion of the distance function issue see [Veit, 1999].

The result of the recursive computation of distance values is

(i) an overall distance (real value between 0 and 1) which reflects the quality of the considered candidate instance for the current centroid instance.

(ii) a structure (in XML) which consists of the individual distance results in each layer.

The best k candidates (with respect to the current centroid) are returned as the result of the match. This list is ranked using the value from (i).

The agent (or the agent's principal) can then recur into the XML structure described in (ii) to obtain an explanation how the particular overall result arose (e.g., which aspects of the match contributed to a good or bad overall result).

3.2 GRAPPA Matchmaking Library

The GRAPPA Matchmaking Library hosts an extensible collection of predefined profile schemas and (general-purpose or domain-specific) distance functions. The profiles schemas can be used as a basis for application-specific profiles; the distance functions provide uniform interfaces that allow us to flexibly combine them to develop specific matchmaking solutions.

It is essential for a matchmaking system to provide powerful distance functions. Currently, we provide distance functions for FreeText, WeightedKeyword, Interval, TimeInterval, DateInterval, Boolean, and Number basic values (i.e. instances of basic types). All distance functions have the property to take two basic values as input and to provide a real number between 0 and 1 as output (distance). Additionally domain specific distance functions, can be integrated as we shall describe in Section 5.

On top of these basic functions, we define aggregate distance functions. Currently, WeightedAverage, Average, Minimum, Maximum are supported as predefined aggregate functions. As for basic functions, it is possible to define domain specific aggregate functions and integrate them into a domain specific matchmaker.

As an example for a basic distance function in GRAPPA, we show the default distance function for free text. This distance function is based on a cosine similarity measure developed in information retrieval [Salton, 1989]. Any free text document *T* can be associated with a document vector *dv* by removing stopwords and performing stemming on the remaining words. For each word, its frequency in *T* is assigned (called the *term frequency (tf))*. Given a collection of *N* documents, the *document frequency (df)* of a word stem is the number of documents in which it occurs. The *term-frequency-inverse-document-frequency factor (tf-idf factor)*

$$tf \cdot \log(N/df)$$

has proven to be a useful weight for a word stem. The documents are represented in a document space by their document vector consisting of the *tf-idf* factors.

The similarity of two documents T_1 and T_2 is computed as the cosine between the corresponding document vectors in the document space [Salton, 1989]:

$$sim(T_1, T_2) := \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{k} w_{1,j} \cdot w_{2,j}}{\sqrt{\sum_{j=1}^{k}(w_{1,j})^2 \sum_{j=1}^{k}(w_{2,j})^2}},$$

where

$$w_{i,j} = tf_{i,j} \cdot \log \frac{N}{df_j}$$

for *i=1* or *i=2* is the weight for term *j* in document *i* and *k* is the dimension of the document space.

3.3 GRAPPA Toolkit

The GRAPPA Toolkit provides a set of tools which enable the development of a multidimensional matchmaker for specific applications mainly through configuration without much coding work. To guide the marketplace designer we have defined a 5-step process to obtain a domain specific matchmaking solution:

(1) Define the centroid and candidate schemas (basic entries) in XML;

(2) Define the clusters of attributes in XML (pseudo-orthogonalization); clustering can be recursive;

(3) Associate the clusters of the centroid with clusters of the candidate by applying appropriate distance function;

(4) Combine the results of the distance functions to an overall distance value (e.g., weighted sum);

(5) Apply feedback regarding the quality of the matches, e.g., by adaptively changing weights or matching functions.

Steps (1) – (4) are explained in more detail in Section 4. The feedback process in (5) is currently implemented as a simple real value between 0 and 1 which the systems user can return to the system. With this value the user can indicate how he judged the systems matchmaking result for the particular item.

4 Matchmaking Implementation

In this section, we describe key issues of implementation of the matchmaking framework. We focus on the requirements described in Section 1; in particular, the framework has been designed to be extensible and to be integrated easily into commercial e-business platforms.

4.1 Basic entities and processes

In this section, we describe the basic computational concepts used in our implementation. The centroid profile encapsulates the structure of the originating request. This structure is defined by means of an XML document type definition (DTD). Requests on the domain-specific matchmaker must conform to this DTD.

Candidate profiles are the data instances on which the matchmaking will be processed (e.g. records in an applicants database). Alike the centroid profile, this structure must be defined in an XML document type definition.

Example of candidate and centroid profile:

Centroid:	Candidate:
`job_profile`	`Person`
`  max_age`	`  Age`
`  max_wage`	`  Expected_wage`
`job_description`	`Soft_skills`
	`Hard_skills`

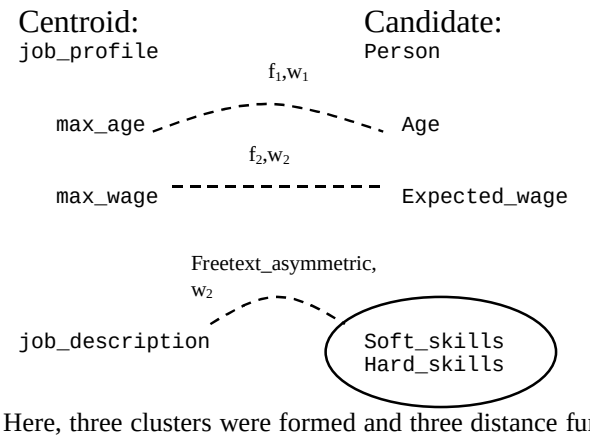
To compute a match between centroid and candidate profile based on various distance functions, a 1:1-mapping between the elements of the centroid and the candidate is required. Especially if the centroid and the candidate provide a different number of top-level attributes a orthogonalization process is required which will be described in the following. In this process, attributes that together describe a separate semantic aspect relevant for matchmaking are determined and grouped into a cluster. An attribute may be contained in more than one cluster. If this is the case, they are duplicated to preserve orthogonality.

As described in Section 3.2, the matchmaking library provides a number of built-in distance functions that can be used to create domain-specific matchmakers. All distance functions will need to implement an interface `DistanceFunction`. This way, domain-specific distance functions implementing custom semantics required for specific matchmaking solutions can be provided.

Aggregate functions are used by the matchmaker to compute a multi-attribute result from the values returned by the basic distance functions. The matchmaking library contains the aggregate function WeightedSum to compute a weighted sum of the basic distances as an overall result.

Different aggregate functions implementing thresholds, hard constraints, or averages can be included similarly as additional distance functions using the interface `AggregateFunction`.

Example after orthogonalization and association of distance functions:



Here, three clusters were formed and three distance functions, f_1, f_2, and f_3, were associated to the clusters.

4.2 Configuration

In order to customize the generic matchmaker for a domain, we provide a configuration process: First, the structure of centroid (request to the matchmaker) and candidate (data instances) profiles has to be defined. These structures must be provided as XML document type definitions (DTD). During the matchmaking process, instances of the centroid and candidate profiles must comply with these DTDs. Then, the main configuration file (XML document) has to be created. In this document, the clustering of attributes, and association of distance functions with each pair of centroid / candidate cluster pair are specified. Additionally this document contains the specification of the aggregate parameters whose meaning depends on the corresponding aggregate function (in the case of the weighted sum, the aggregate parameter would represent simply the weight).

Furthermore for each cluster pair, a constraint type (soft or hard) must be declared. This type determines the impact of an absolute inequality of a cluster-pair on the overall result. So a distance of 0 of one cluster compar-ison with the comparison type strong would lead to an overall result of 0 independent of any other comparison result. Each cluster and its associated distance function is considered as one dimension in the configuration. The configuration entries for each dimension are grouped as 5-tuples consisting of: (i) cluster from centroid; (ii) cluster from candidate; (iii) distance function; (iv) aggregate parameter; and (v) constraint type. As mentioned above, the computation of a distance value between two clusters can also be done by dividing each cluster into its subitems, compute the distance of these subitems directly and use an aggregate function to obtain an overall result for this cluster.

In this case the corresponding dimension entry in the configuration file would have a number of sub-dimension entries and instead of a distance function an aggregate function for the overall result has to be specified.

Dimension entries in configuration file for the example above:

```
<Configuration>
  <Dimension>
    <LeftName>job_profile</LeftName>
    <RightName>Person</RightName>
    <Dimension>
      <LeftName>max_age</LeftName>
      <RightName>Age</RightName>
      <DistanceFuntion>
      Age_Dist</DistanceFunction>
      <AggregateParameter>
      50<AggregateParameter>
      <Type>weak</Type>
    </Dimension>
    <Dimension>
      <LeftName>max_wage</LeftName>
      <RightName>Expected_wage</RightName>
      <DistanceFunction>
      Wage_Dist</DistanceFunction>
      <AggregateParameter>
      50</AggregateParameter>
      <Type>weak</Type>
    </Dimension>
    <AggregateFunction>
    WeightedSum</AggregateFunction>
    <AggregateParameter>30</AggregateParameter>
    <Type>strong</Type>
  </Dimension>
  <Dimension>
    <LeftName>job_description</LeftName>
    <RightName>soft_skills</RightName>
    <RightName>hard_skills</RightName>
    <DistanceFunction>FreeText_Asymmetric
    </DistanceFunction>
    <AggregateParameter>70</AggregateParameter>
    <Type>strong</Type>
  </Dimension>
</Configuration>
```

The configuration file with a structure as described above is written in XML using a special Configuration document type definition `Configuration.dtd` provided as a part of the matchmaking library.

Using this configuration information, a domain-specific instance of the matchmaker can be created automatically.

4.3 Matchmaking JAVA-library

The matchmaking library consists of a number of classes covering configuration aspects such as dimension entries and the main configuration file, a class for the generic matchmaker which operates with the configuration and carries out the matchmaking process between instances of corresponding classes for centroid and candidates. The matchmaking result is covered by a class which provides detailed information about the matchmaking process such as information about each cluster-cluster comparison, reasons for “disqualifying” a candidate, output to XML, etc. The following paragraphs provide a short description of the most important classes included in the matchmaking library:

The dimension-class encapsulates the dimension entry (a 5-tuple) in the configuration file with declaration of the clusters in centroid and candidate, distance function (resp. sub-dimensions an aggregate function), the aggregate

parameter and type. Since a dimension can have multiple sub-dimensions, this class is defined recursively.
The config-class is the main configuration class, encapsulating the configuration file and administering the dimension entries. During construction, an object of this class loads all required distance and aggregate functions, creates dimension entries and builds the necessary internal structure for the matchmaker. Additionally this class provides the application with two factory objects for loading centroid and candidate data. Instances of the matching class must be initialized with a configuration object and will then perform the domain-specific matchmaking on centroid and candidates. Additionally this class can have a number of candidate providers from which candidates can be drawn.

The candidate provider interface automates the access of candidate data for the matchmaker. Implementing this class the user has the ability to preview and preselect candidates from various data sources before matchmaking so that unnecessary comparisons can be avoided.

4.4 Deployment as Enterprise Java Beans component

In addition to the classes of the basic matchmaker described above the library provides a set of classes for the deployment of a domain-specific matchmaker in an application server to provide matchmaking functionality in the context of a commercial e-business platform and to make it available from the web or from other clients. These classes are two wrapper classes for the MMConfig and the matching class with some extra functionality suitable for EJB components.

Config, ConfigEJB, ConfigHome: Classes for the ConfigBean as a wrapper for the MMConfig class. This Enterprise Java Bean is realized as an entity bean to provide a persistent storage for domain-specific configurations of the matchmaker.

Matchmaker, MatchmakerEJB, MatchmakerHome: These classes represent the MatchmakerBean session bean with the matchmaking functionality. In combination with an instance of the ConfigBean this class performs the matchmaking in the application server.

5 Application: HRNetAgent

Due to the open, flexible architecture of the GRAPPA framework, it can be applied to a wide range of matchmaking problems in all sorts of (agent- or human-operated) electronic marketplaces. In this section, we provide a brief description of one industrial project in which GRAPPA has been applied successfully. The Siemens “Human Resource Network Agent” (HRNetAgent) project.

The HRNetAgent is an application of GRAPPA for matching corporate job profiles with profiles of job applicants (i.e., unemployed persons), stored in various data bases.

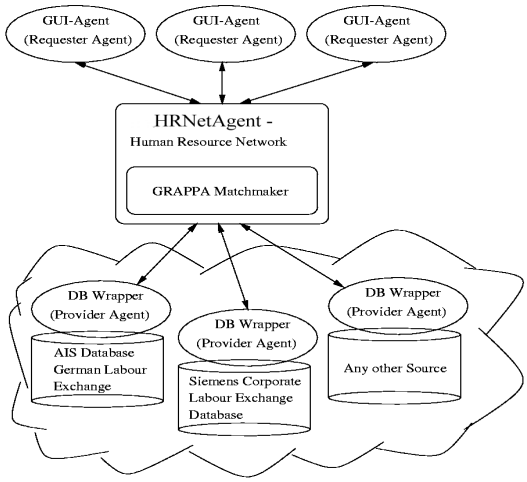


Figure 2. HRNetAgent System overview

The current version of HRNetAgent is a prototype system that has been developed for the German Federal Labor Exchange Office[1], and demonstrates the feasibility of a partially automated approach to employment relaying. Based on its success, a full-fledged system is planned for the near future. The potential return on investment is huge: reducing the relaying time of unemployed persons (currently, there are about 4 million people in Germany without employment) just by one day on average will save the German government more than a hundred million dollars a year.

Figure 2 shows the architecture of the HRNetAgent system. A company specifies its job profiles to a designated GUI-Agent, which takes the role of a requester agent in the system. The GUI-Agent queries the matchmaker by sending to HRNetAgent the description of the open position which should be filled. The scheme for specifying the open positions is the centroid. The backend of HRNetAgent consists of a collection of data sources wrapped by information agents, and by a search controller that coordinates a number of search agents. E.g., one data source is the central database of the German Federal Labor Exchange Office, in which all currently unemployed persons in Germany are stored. Others may be corporate skills databases, Further databases can be easily integrated. Note that the database wrapper agents play the role of virtual provider agents in our architecture.

The HrNetAgent human resource market is designed to find appropriate applicants from heterogeneous sources (e.g. the employee data of different companies). The results are displayed for the user in a homogeneous way. These properties fulfill main points of the desiderata for future job markets formulated by Maier et. al. in [Maier et. al., 2000].

Wrapper agents perform the task of query translation, connection handling, and result translation. They return a preselection of profiles to the matchmaker based on conditions extracted from the centroid profile. In HRNet-

[1] http://www.arbeitsamt.de

Agent, the centroid and candidate schemes are converted to XML-DTDs which are considered as the document classes of these types. Matchmaking thus is done on a preselection of candidates. The most successful candidates for a job profile are stored in the local service repository for fast access by the application. In addition, HRNet-Agent offers an automated notification service via SMS, Fax, or Email.

6 Conclusions

In this paper, we have described a generic approach to matchmaking in agent- or human-mediated electronic marketplaces. The focus of this work is on achieving the flexibility and openness required to build a matchmaking framework that can be easily applied to different vertical marketplaces and that can be integrated into a broad range of industrial marketplace platforms. Currently, the matchmaking framework described in Section 3 will be developed to product stage. It will be used both to enable matchmaking in agent-based marketplace applications within Siemens and for "non-agent enabled" electronic marketplaces. Our hope is that this will be a starting point allowing us to push the deployment of agents into mainstream e-business systems.

A current restriction of the system is that it only provides 1:N matchmaking. I.e., the Matchmaker will always consider one demand profile and multiple supply profiles, and vice versa. It cannot deal with matching problems as they occur in continuous double auctions, where the best matches combining multiple demand and supply profiles need to be identified (see e.g., [Sandholm, 2000]). Future work will include the development of corresponding matching functions for N:M matchmaking.

Also, the system currently provides only very basic feedback mechanisms that can be used to adapt the matchmaking configuration. We believe that learning capability will be required to achieve robust and good matchmaking behavior, and we are planning to incorporate feedback rules into the system in the future.

One future research objective will be to apply multidimensional matchmaking for relevance computation in electronic negotiations. Bichler [Bicher, 2000] states that multi-attribute auctions use a mechanism which determines a winning bid among n different bids. This mechanism can be seen as an application of multidimensional matchmaking. In our future work we intend to apply the GRAPPA matchmaking system to multi-attribute auctions in practice. Finally, more elaborate methods are required to test the performance of complex matchmaking solutions as the one described in Section 3 and 4.

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