

# Beyond Features & Functions: Evaluating RM Software Alternatives in a Real-World Environment

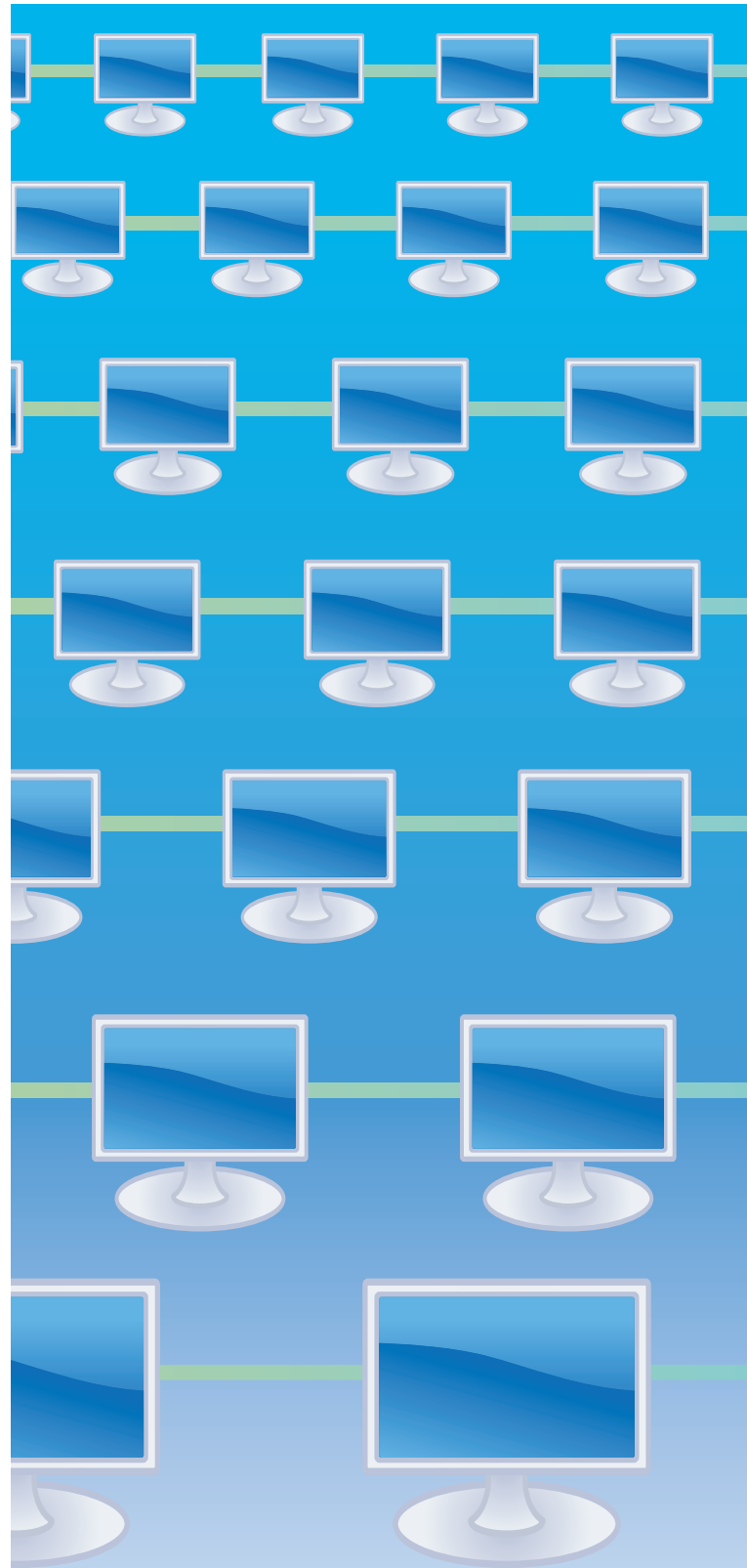
Prudent purchasers will consider a number of key issues before selecting a vendor for enterprise electronic records management software installations

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**T**oo many organizations view electronic records management (ERM) software selection through a narrow lens. Some enterprises will create massive spreadsheet-based matrices with lists of features and functions broken down in minute detail. These features and functions are weighted by priority, then added and scored to rank vendors and products based on empirical data. This can be a useful exercise for winnowing out the vendors that definitely do not fit the organization's requirements profile. But several other key issues must be considered when evaluating ERM software.

- Integration with present and planned business and infrastructure environments that are already in place
- Vendor partnerships
- Operating systems and databases
- Web-based or client/server-based access of key functions
- Auditing and reporting
- Licensing
- Company ownership
- Overall usability and training





However, software alone is not what ideal ERM implementations are all about, and organizations still need to focus first on creating solid records management programs before embarking on a software evaluation process.

In general, ERM systems should be able to provide automated control and tracking of an organization's file plans, records retention, and disposition plans and provide an optimized process for helping users to identify and file, or "declare," a document – whether electronic or otherwise – as a record. Of course, each organization must prioritize how important key ERM features and functions are within its own environment, but some aspects of software evaluation should be given as much – or more – weight as operational factors on the overall scoring during the product selection process.

### Integration

Many ERM vendors have the same one-liner somewhere within their marketing material – "easy to integrate with legacy applications." Unfortunately, easy integration is much simpler to say than it is to actually do and depends on the organization's legacy application and the ERM software with which it is integrating.

Just what is a legacy system? According to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, the word *legacy* means "something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past." When it comes to software, legacy can mean an application developed more than 20 years ago for mainframe-based systems or the two-year-old application that has now become an integral part of the company's software portfolio, such as SAP's Enterprise Resource Planning system, Oracle Financial Services, Lawson, and others. "Legacy" in the technology and business worlds has less to do with age and more to do with being the application still standing after all mergers, acquisitions, and other software consolidation exercises have taken place.

So, if an organization is using SAP or Oracle/Peoplesoft, and a good portion of its information is created with these applications, it is important to determine how well-integrated the ERM system can be with the in place system. The ERM product should be evaluated not just on the premise that the vendor offers an application programming interface (API) or software link to the existing system but that the API has been installed by other users

### At the Core

#### This article

- ▶ Identifies key issues to consider when evaluating ERM software
- ▶ Highlights the important questions to ask before choosing a vendor
- ▶ Emphasizes the importance of research, communication, and training in successful implementation projects

and is not just a one-off, quick fix for a problem that the vendor may have solved for another client.

And, if the vendor offers integration as a customized feature, it is important to determine what that really means. Is there a sufficient mapping capability to the legacy application, or must a great deal of custom code be written to create the interface?

Does the company already use document management (DM) tools with repositories in place, such as IBM's FileNet, EMC Documentum, Open Text, or other systems in various divisions or departments? Mergers and acquisitions, along with efforts by some companies to create an enterprise-wide records management strategy, have increased the need for ERM products to go beyond their initial proprietary repositories and support the management of records in "foreign" repositories. This is referred to as federated records management.

The ability to manage records located in multiple repositories using one ERM software product seems to be the next feature that every ERM vendor wants to deliver to its customer base. Federated records management can be extremely useful for those organizations that have a variety of document repositories in place and don't want the hassle of migrating parts or the whole legacy base to a proprietary ERM system. But, buyer beware. "Federated" means different things to different vendors. For some, it means just being able to access disparate repositories that are architected in the same way – such as dealing with multiple, dispersed Microsoft SharePoint repositories. For others, it means connecting to a select set of other competitive repositories using special APIs or modules at an additional cost. This isn't necessarily bad, but it can be confusing, and potential users should clarify with the vendor exactly which outside repositories are supported, what additional software is required, and how much each connector will cost.

Even without federated capabilities, many ERM vendors offer connectivity to specific repositories and databases as well as some generic architectures. If a company's original DM repository is not among those supported, access to repositories across the enterprise could be a challenge. (Notice that no one ever says "impossible"; nothing is impossible with enough time and money.)

Many records management software vendors have made significant efforts to develop products on standard architectures and platforms so that integration can be easier and less costly than it was in the past. But, legacy systems that were originally built on such standard architectures as DB2 or J2EE, as well as newly installed XML applications, can have many different release levels,

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versions, and custom APIs that can make them non-standard in a very short time.

Also, as a result of industry consolidation, ERM features are now becoming more tightly integrated with other enterprise content management (ECM) technologies, such as electronic imaging, workflow, and document management. As with anything else, tight integration of ERM with ECM has its trade-offs, with good and bad implications for users.

The bad: some ERM products have become so tightly integrated with a particular document or content repository that they may not be flexible enough for use in multi-repository environments, unless the vendor has created an open, federated records management strategy. Tight integration also means that ERM implementation alternatives may be limited where a content or document management repository is already in place – unless the organization is in the market for a different vendor.

The good: tighter integration actually brings with it greater ease of use, the hope of increased user adoption, and, therefore, better compliance. Having a consistent user interface with a shared repository simplifies training and, in some ways, optimizes storage resources.

### Partnerships

Most software vendors thrive on partnerships, and ERM suppliers are no exception. Partnerships are made on many different levels. Technology partners share complementary products and integrate them to provide a stronger application platform – in many cases, making up for whatever features the baseline platform lacks. Systems integrator partners can provide customized interfaces, and many times also provide entrée to clients that vendors would not have access to if they tried to sell their product on a standalone basis. This is particularly true with government agencies, which generally don't implement large systems without an integration partner.

Reseller partners provide the product supplier with an added distribution channel. Although they sometimes provide customization services, resellers focus on expanding the vendor's sales channel and help to support the product for the customer base, which may be focused in a particular region or in a particular industry market.

When a "partner" either presents or is presented by the vendor, it is important to really understand what depth their relationship has. If they have been thrown together to respond to a request for proposal versus having a long-standing relationship,

they are less likely to have a fully integrated product offering at hand or real-life experience working together.

On the other hand, the right technology or integration partner can speed up the implementation of a complex ERM project. Unfortunately, because of consolidations in the ERM market, such partnerships are falling apart, as partners become competitors overnight. These situations are particularly tough on customers that have implemented an integrated solution. In some instances, the primary vendor now won't let the technology partner support the client because the two are on opposite sides of the fence.

To protect against this kind of situation, clients should stipulate in writing that support and implementation continue for their applications no matter what happens to the partners.

When looking at the integration of ERM software with business application software, consider these questions:

- Is the partnership viewed as a sales opportunity by the parties involved (more like a one-night stand than a customer engagement), or is this integration viewed as a long-term strategic direction? Check for inconsistency of message and understand which company brought in the other.
- What level of integration are they talking about? "Field" integration by the respective professional services organizations may represent a quick solution, but it is likely to be more tenuous than lower-level software integration, which usually awaits product update releases on both sides.
- Even if the services of a systems integrator or reseller are readily available, does the organization want to be in the position of paying for updates and upgrades of custom integration?

### Operating Systems and Databases

It is not enough to know that a vendor's product has been built on the same operating system and database applications that a customer has in-house. It is also important to understand what release levels are supported, how indexing is performed, whether the records exist as one copy on a proprietary database with a pointer to another, and what kinds of network operating systems have been used by the vendor.

For example, just because an ERM vendor uses an Oracle database architecture within its product, it may not be at the same release level as the one being used in the potential buyer's organi-

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zation. This can be a problem if either the vendor's or the user's application is several release levels behind the other or if many custom queries and other custom code have to be migrated to the new application.

Even if a company's databases are all in sync with a vendor's offerings and the integration at that level runs smoothly, the company's document repositories may be another matter. Many organizations initially installed document management systems such as Documentum, FileNet, or IBM's Content Manager on a departmental level. Mergers, acquisitions, and just plain common sense are spurring the desire to now provide users with access across multiple repositories using one interface – for example, through whatever document or content management system the user has on his or her desktop. Again, review the vendor's federated strategies and implementations.

The bottom line is to understand the organization's overall operating systems and database architectures, both present and future, and make sure they are congruent with the ERM vendor selected. In addition,

just because one product is marketed by a vendor doesn't mean that it is compatible with all the vendor's other products.

### Clients

These days just about every ERM system has the ability to use a web-based interface that offers users some degree of familiarity. It is important to understand what level of functionality is possible at the web client level, the thick client level, (a thick client is one in which a piece of software needs to be installed on each user's PC), and at the server level. Some ERM features may be possible only with the thick client level, requiring that software plugins or applications be installed at the desktop level to achieve the full functionality of the product. This is particularly true for records administration functions, such that records managers might not be able to provide file plan and administrative support through a web client interface.

### Auditing and Reporting

Any ERM system should create and maintain an audit trail, sometimes called use-history metadata, for all records activity and system functions. The system should also allow access to audit trail information at the detailed level, for example, showing record identifier, time, date, and user for each individual record access. The system should provide summary reports and track failed attempts of all records activity and system functions. An ERM system should store audit trail information – such as number of

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accesses, details of individual record retrievals, or attempts to delete a record – so it can be managed as a record.

Canned reports should be available to track retention schedules, record classes, and other standard information. In addition, easy-to-create custom report capabilities should be available for special audit and investigative situations. Although most ERM vendors provide some canned reports for their systems, they are limited in number and may not be at all relevant to the way the organization reviews and manages its records management program.

It is important to identify the kind of information needed at this level, how it should be organized, and how often reports need to be run, then evaluate the product's capabilities in this area. It is unrealistic to expect that any vendor will support all reporting needs, but try not to be tempted to hardwire custom reports into a generic system. It is realistic to review and ensure that the tools for creating custom reports are viable within the organization's technical environment and easy enough for records administrators and others to use to create reports on the fly.

### Licensing

Trying to do an apples-to-apples price comparison across different vendor alternatives can be a frustrating and time-consuming experience. Some vendors have very straightforward licensing practices that make it relatively easy to ascertain and estimate the cost of the software and provide an average per user cost. Unfortunately, other vendors have such complicated and highly customized licensing procedures that even the sales representatives can't give an off-the-cuff estimate of costs without running many numbers and models. And, if anything changes in the configuration, the revised estimate may be a whole different ball game. Don't forget the other costs such as maintenance fees, staff training, additional hardware, customization costs, and staff costs to maintain the application. These can be significant.

When making pricing comparisons, create a realistic scenario for how the system will be used and by how many people, taking into account remote locations and networking costs. Then compare the total cost across all elements to get a better idea of what the entire ERM implementation effort will cost.

### Ownership

A vendor capable of innovative software development may not have capable business management. Be careful to examine the balance sheet of the vendor whose software is under consideration

to ensure that the vendor has the financial resources to sustain the viability of its software over the long term. A contract that says the software will be put in escrow as a protection against the software developer going out of business is of little value to a purchaser that is not or does not want to be involved in software development to ensure the software's continued use.

And, even profitable companies can become takeover targets by larger companies. It's important to keep an ear to the ground with regard to the company's strategic direction as a business. Looking at balance sheets is one way of doing this, but it is also necessary to understand how the software company is funded. Venture-funded companies are more prone to be sold for a profit than are self-sustaining companies.

If the company is in the middle of a merger, has the acquiring company made it clear what its direction for the software will be? It can take six months to two years for the dust to settle after an acquisition. During that time, the software development efforts and integration strategies

could take a u-turn from the company's previous direction or just remain stagnant until things are sorted out.

There are no cut-and-dried recommendations except to buy what works now within the organization's environment and don't buy on speculated or promised features and functions. They may not survive the change.

### Overall Usability and Training

Usability and training are crucial parts of the evaluation process, and the success of any ERM system pretty much hinges on users' ability to manage records quickly and effectively in a comfortable processing environment. Unique user interfaces are not the way to go if an organization wants to encourage its staff to comply with its records management program. If it takes users more than five seconds to think about what they need to do during the process of identifying and "locking" a document into the ERM system, they will put off doing the declaration process until they have the time – which could be days or weeks later.

Education and training are the most important aspects of successful projects. It is physically impossible and managerially untenable to expect one department in an organization, namely records management or archives, to be the only area that is knowledgeable about what needs to be archived or filed and for how long. This knowledge needs to be disseminated throughout the organization and distributed among departmental coordinators who educate and guide employees at all levels. A good ERM prod-



uct can cue an employee as to where a document needs to go and may even automatically set a retention period based on the document type or classification, but it still takes an intelligent person who understands the document's business context to put it where it belongs in the first place.

Compliance with records management procedures doesn't work without training and enforcement. Installing ERM software is not a silver bullet for staying out of jail, but it can save organizations significant time and money associated with avoiding that consequence if the vendor and the implementing organization work together to train users effectively on how to use the system.

### Base Decision-Making on Reality – Not Just Numeric Scores

The comfort level with the vendor company and the vendor's potential implementation partners are important factors to consider.

A reality check on the finalists is therefore essential. Sometimes the empirical method of evaluating features and functions allows a vendor to float to the surface when, in fact, that vendor may be out of its league. For example, a vendor that does everything required may appear attractive, but it may be that 20 modules within its product set are needed to get what one module in another product can do. Many vendors have successfully installed systems on a departmental basis but may not be a good match when scaling to an enterprise-wide effort. A site visit to a

similarly sized installation will teach more about a prospective supplier than any demos or sales pitches can.

Finally, although most vendors try to represent themselves honestly, sometimes to get the sale, an overly aggressive salesperson will promise more than the vendor can realistically deliver. Insist that prospective suppliers go beyond just saying that they support a feature or function and explain how they do it, demonstrating it on the spot. When in doubt, test. Then test again with actual employees. ■

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