

ERP: HELPING YOU AND YOUR PARTNERS

Dan Roberts tracks enterprise software's latest big shift – to faster, better decentralised decision making across your whole industry network.



Dan Roberts: make data easy to find and use

One of Cambashi's research areas focuses on how the enterprise software landscape is changing. The current underlying trend is the same one that led to the formation of ERP out of the departmental solutions of manufacturing, finance, HR and distribution; in turn, the sales and marketing departments were added to the mix as CRM systems became more closely integrated into the solution.

The new challenge that's high on the agenda for enterprises now is trying to provide the most efficient industry network – the group of companies that together produce the final product to the consumer.

Departmental solutions focused on optimising the department; ERP focused on optimising the enterprise. Now companies need solutions to help them optimise the whole path, from raw material to consumer.

But there are a number of individual issues that need to be overcome on the road to success. One of them is the desire to improve decision making. This is not just about getting better decisions – business intelligence solutions have been helping to provide that for years. It is also about making those decisions faster and taking actions at the points they are needed.

In other words, the information needs to be distributed to managers wherever they are. But that information needs to be both timely and accurate – in essence, head office and remote subsidiary have the same information at the same time.

To an extent, these challenges are being addressed by some of the new applications released in the last few years. SAP is promoting its in-memory applications to speed up the availability of information to executives; and Infor has announced a transaction archive which retains a copy of all transactions, so that live queries on it do not affect the performance of the core ERP system.

Most ERP vendors have also announced mobile access solutions to enable managers to log on to the enterprise system remotely. But one of the key challenges may turn out to be making those systems easy to use.

IFS recently announced a survey by its US division into the usability of ERP solutions. What it discovered was that managers are likely to use something other than their ERP system if they find it too hard to use. Most will use Excel instead, although a significant minority also use online tools like Google Apps.

More worryingly, the survey found that managers between the ages of 18 and 35 are likely to change jobs if they find the enterprise software difficult to use. Clearly, companies need to find solutions that not only provide the right data at the right time, but they also need to make the data easy to find and use.

There is a paradox here – IT departments need to ensure that the right information gets to not only internal managers, but also out to the wider industry network; that ought to imply barriers to allow access only to the data to be shared, while sensitive information has restricted access.

However, if the information flow is to enable the most efficient industry network, then the shared data needs to be easy to access for network partners and the sensitive data easy to use for internal managers. Finding the balance that works may prove to be one of the key success factors in the new economy.

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