

## VISIONARY OR FOOL?

*It may be more useful to be on time with technology, not ahead of time, reasons Dan Roberts.*



**Dan Roberts: focus on the best payback for the business**

It can seem very desirable if your colleagues and bosses decide to give you the accolade of being 'years ahead of your time'. They are recognising that your knowledge and insights are cutting through the fog, and you are articulating visions of worthwhile future goals.

But hold on. Isn't it even more valuable, and arguably more difficult, to be 'on time' rather than 'ahead'? Knowing what is effective and worthwhile today allows you to justify it, plan it, implement it and deploy it, as well as talk about it!

For IT systems generally, and ERP in particular, the transitions from 'future vision' to 'worthwhile now' are triggered by the cost, availability and reliability of key technologies. And the technologies that are crossing critical thresholds right now are cloud and mobile.

As you plan the development of your ERP system, the easy future vision – that everything will be hosted on cloud systems and accessed through mobile devices – doesn't help very much.

It could still be a long time before this is true for the majority of systems. Until then, you need to be able to pick which applications, which users and when.

Of course, it's not entirely true to say that technology is the only driver. The nature of demand is also significant. If your top management want to use tablet computers to access materials for meetings, then perhaps your next project is already defined, even if your calculations show you could get substantial ROI from a new production scheduling capability delivered directly to supervisors roaming around your factories.

So what are the parameters that will help you establish some sort of a plan? Clearly, you (and your bosses) want step-by-step progress towards lower-cost systems. You also want to deliver results in more convenient ways. You want to focus on the best payback for the business. So should you be pushing your supplier(s) to deliver cloud and mobile enabled versions of every application? Perhaps not.

A possibly apocryphal Chinese proverb is that 'If you want to know the road ahead, ask someone coming back'. In this context, it is highly illuminating to recall the way that salesforce.com launched on an online-only architecture, then very soon added synchronisation capabilities to allow users to continue working when an online connection was not available.

It is worth remembering that while cloud technology can dramatically improve the utilisation of servers, so reducing the cost of compute and perhaps storage, there is cost associated with getting data in and out.

So the 'best' cloud applications require small amounts of input and output, with lots of compute, and ideally the compute will be based on reference to static data.

And when it comes to access via mobile devices, of course there are security and user interface issues to handle. But if you pick an application where users will demand offline update capabilities as well, you and/or your software supplier need to be ready for the complexities of synchronisation.

It's much easier to look over the horizon!

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