

## CHANGE WITHOUT TEARS

*The latest ERP innovations can take companies in a radical new direction without scaring off even the most conservative among them, writes Dan Roberts.*

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**Dan Roberts: real business improvements**

ERP providers can be a trusted partner to support even conservative companies when making big business shifts.

I recently attended both a Sage Software North American analyst event and the Activant Summit user conference. Sage ERP products serve primarily small and medium businesses, and Activant focuses on the distribution industry. The two vendors shared some themes that may position them to deliver increasing value, even to these conservative segments:

- **Mobile applications.** Sage has introduced the Enterprise Webtop for X3 to deal with mobile employee access. Likewise Activant's proof-of-delivery application for iPhones and Android devices provides delivery drivers with routing information and signature capture, plus special terms, order changes, returns and even photographs of the delivery itself.

- **Ease of use.** Both vendors go beyond 'better user interfaces'. Sage has embedded Microsoft Office applications and offers Sage Advisor, a context-intelligent tool that pops up on screen if the user has a recurring error or uses a complex workflow when a simple one is available. Sage also has Visual Processes that provide users with an intuitive way to complete complex tasks, while ensuring quality procedures.

Meanwhile Activant's DynaChange Extensibility Series allows customers to 'sculpt' their systems to better reflect unique work processes. This includes personalising user interfaces, configuring business process workflows (even outside the ERP system) and custom portals.

- **Routine task automation.** Activant's AutoOrder is getting excellent pick-up from customers, as it allows them to generate electronic purchase orders (POs) even from customers with no software or EDI capabilities. This will begin to enable ERP to operate cross-company workflows.

- **Analytics.** Sage Embedded Analytics now has a starter kit that delivers pre-configured analytics for 15 roles and 110 processes, and can offer a unified view across sites worldwide. Activant has a role-based executive dashboard that auto-highlights trends and exceptions, as well as Zoom 360, which defines and segments customers based on profitability. My view is that analytics are critical to running a business effectively today.

Putting all these elements together enables big business changes:

- More employees being able to understand and use the system from wherever they are can be a big win.
- Having competitive-advantage company practices embedded into the business system and easier trading partner communication further changes the game. When companies can see not only transactions but also intelligence, decisions tend to drive real business improvements.

So what's next? Fabled high-tech industry consultant Geoffrey Moore was keynote speaker at the Activant Summit and described 'enterprise systems of engagement' to complement systems of record.

These are intended to deliver a user experience more like that which consumers have with social media and web-based applications. His four descriptors of these new systems are:

1. Mobile to be in the moment.
2. Social to share facts and insights with others.
3. *Ad hoc* to cope with how issues emerge.
4. Real time to resolve issues best.

Sage and Activant are not scaring their conservative customers with radical moves in this direction. In essence, the two vendors are offering ERP customers a path to evolve, whilst holding on to what has been working in the past.

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