

WHAT USE IS MOBILE ERP?

Dan Roberts casts a critical eye over the latest ERP Big Thing.



Dan Roberts: returns may be significant

Most ERP vendors proudly claim their solutions are available on mobile platforms, explaining that managers can access their ERP solution from their smartphones. But what exactly are you supposed to achieve with your small screen and virtual keyboard? Is this just following consumer fashion without having any useful application?

For mobile staff, such as sales and field service engineers, the application of mobile software is obvious – field salespeople can access their CRM systems from their smartphones, getting all the information they require without the need to visit the office; field service engineers can have as-built product information to hand when servicing machines, with maintenance records easily available.

But while most ERP vendors include CRM functionality with their solutions, none of these applications are really using the core ERP system.

So are there properly useful applications within the core ERP solution? Here are some examples of how mobile ERP might impact your business:

- For HR solutions, often referred to as human capital management (HCM), the benefits are mainly for the employee. For example, employees can submit expense claims remotely, allowing them to claim when they have the receipt in hand, rather than having to search for it later; they can also manage their holidays and personal development remotely, often in their own time.

The benefit for companies from these applications is harder to gauge, though happier, more engaged staff tend to work more effectively.

- Supply chain and manufacturing solutions offer more obvious benefits. Production and operations managers can receive alerts whenever there are potential problems – such as raw materials stuck in transit, or machine breakdowns. Without mobile ERP, these alerts are only visible when the managers are at their computer; with mobile alerts, they can be informed of problems immediately.

With full ERP access on their smartphone, managers can even authorise changes to expedite specific work orders or deliveries. And with links into the finance applications, then finance managers become aware of the implications of supply or manufacturing issues straightaway, enabling better decisions to be made. In very large manufacturing facilities, using mobile ERP might eliminate the need for expensive networks and ruggedised terminals.

- In sales & marketing, mobile CRM is relatively well-established, but sales staff can be further helped by having full integration with their ERP system available on a mobile device. For example, it might be important for sales staff to understand the profitability of a deal – links to finance and manufacturing can help.

Complex sales can be greatly helped by having a live sales configurator available. Customers can tailor their solution to their individual needs, while sales staff are then able to quote delivery times based on actual scheduled manufacturing. Having a live mobile link avoids any problems arising from offline deals that are not synchronised for a few hours.

Overall, once you break the tie-in to a terminal or even a laptop, features which were helpful can become vital. Mobile ERP can provide surprising benefits in almost any situation where the user works more effectively away from their desk.

Were you to ask them, you might find your users are thinking “If only I could do this while I’m away from my desk...” So while some core ERP mobile applications may not provide a good return on investment for a lot of companies, for others the returns may be significant.

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