

9 top tips for integrating the best of your IT systems

Developing and deploying a brand new ERP solution can be an immense and costly task and it may well leave you with another entirely new set of problems to overcome.

An alternative, that is becoming increasingly popular, is to integrate your existing separate systems so that your data and reporting functionality flows seamlessly from one to another. Done well, you can get the same access to business critical information that you would from a new ERP, but more quickly and at less cost, without having to make wholesale changes to your existing processes and methods. Here are our top tips for integrating the best of your existing systems.

1 Use the best of what you've got

If you're going to cherry pick the best of your systems and processes for integration, you'll need to understand which work well and those that don't. Audit and document all your systems and processes to find out which should be retained. If you can keep the best parts of your existing systems by upgrading or enhancing the parts that work well rather than throwing everything out and starting again, you'll make significant financial savings and accelerate speed to completion.

2 Invest where you can make the biggest gains

Whether your integration budget is large or small, you'll get the best return by focusing on the essentials. Data integrity, system resilience and real time availability of accurate business information are far more important than the look and feel of the interface. (Unless you are developing a customer facing solution, when ease of use and customer acceptance is vital.) Although integration can be achieved in many ways, always concentrate investment where you can deliver the biggest gains for the business.

3 Get help from experts who know the way

Systems integration can be very complex and a difficult process to master. The path can be long and there are often many pitfalls along the way. It makes good sense therefore to seek a partner with the skills and experience to guide you through the journey.

A partner who takes the time to understand the imperatives of your business and who has a proven track record of negotiating the difficulties that will inevitably arise, to bring your systems integration project to a successful completion.

As Mark Twain said 'When crossing a swamp, it's best to have someone with you who knows where the alligators hang out'

4 Keep it Simple

Try very hard to keep everything simple, always focussing on the business requirements you need to deliver. Wherever possible use modules of code that will integrate with your existing software and get it all working together to deliver the commercial results you are striving for.

5 Keep strong focus on business vision and needs

The aim of your systems integration should be to deliver a business benefit that drives competitive advantage for your business. Although its structure will be expressed through the languages and platforms that are to be utilised, it is crucial that your intended solution is aligned to your business vision and you have a clear understanding of the benefits that are going to be gained.

7 Set a time frame

Your business case will have developed an overall time frame for the completion of the integration. Clearly identify expected delivery dates and other important project milestones like time allowed for system testing, in your detailed requirements and ask your provider to confirm that they can meet your desired timescale.

It's also a good idea to tie-in payment milestones to the anticipated phase delivery of specific stages of the assignment.

9 Test and Trial

So the development's done and you're almost ready to deploy your integration into production. This is the time to test every aspect of your solution using the resources and time you've previously allocated, so you can carry out the all important user acceptance testing of your new software without causing delay to the final deployment.

It's vital to agree a time frame for final payments made to development partners post deployment, to allow you time to ensure what has been delivered is what you expected and iron out any issues.

6 Manage integration costs

You will have identified the expected ROI in the business case you made to secure the budget for the integration. Always set your budget in accordance with your expected ROI so that you can be sure that the integration will make a sufficient return to justify the outlay and effort.

Ensure your chosen provider supplies an itemised 'menu' of costs, so you can defer or remove some functionality to limit expenditure until a later date. Finally make sure you incorporate the costs of your own staff's time for requirements gathering and user trials in addition to the external costs of development.

8 Keep a common language. Communicate often

A complex integration will require the involvement of many teams from different parts of the organisation. These resources must always be aligned to work from and deliver a common set of requirements. And a common vocabulary and set of working practices will help to ensure efficiency.

Always schedule and hold regular progress meetings so that the project is kept on track and any issues that arise can be resolved. Where some resources are located at remote locations, use of technology including video conferencing can offer frequent virtual face-to-face communication which is both time and cost effective.