

Convenience *and flexibility*: can COTS solutions really deliver it all?

Many organizations today are forced to choose between the convenience of a commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) information management solution, and the flexibility but expense that comes with custom development. But Nigel Davies, Managing Director of information management software provider Claromentis, shows how it is possible to get the best of both worlds.

Under pressure to respond quickly and flexibly to dynamic market conditions, and forced to deal with an explosion in the amount of day-to-day business information that employees must handle, a diverse range of large and small organizations are now investing in enterprise information management solutions.

But many face a dilemma. Should they opt for the convenience of a COTS solution – and sacrifice the ability to tailor the solution to fit their precise needs? Or should they invest in custom development and the advantages of a more flexible alternative – but at a hefty price?

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTOR

Effective information management is key if today's businesses are to keep an increasingly demanding customer base satisfied while meeting aggressive productivity targets. And with remote working becoming ever-more prevalent, providing all employees – including home workers and field staff – with fast and easy access to relevant information has become one of the most pressing IT and operational requirements for the modern-day commercial organization.

The pressure on companies to put in place an effective information management strategy is further compounded by the need to comply with a bewildering array of national and international regulations. Whether your business is in manufacturing or insurance transparency and accountability are now a legal requirement, meaning that companies can face tough penalties if workflows are not enforceable and traceable.

Furthermore, new information-sharing opportunities – while hugely beneficial to businesses – can result in a need for increasingly sophisticated security procedures. Introducing tighter supply chain collaboration and harnessing the power of online communities, for example, enables businesses to optimize processes, improve efficiency and drive innovation. But to take advantage of these opportunities companies must be able to make information available to suppliers and customers in a totally secure manner, ensuring that external parties can only access the data they are supposed to see.

Enterprise-wide information management solutions have been hailed as the perfect way for organizations to address these challenges. However, until now companies have faced a stark choice between the convenience and rapid rollout capabilities offered by a COTS solution, or the flexibility and superior business fit of a custom developed solution – and many are finding that neither are the perfect match.



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PRE-PACKAGED FUNCTIONALITY

COTS solutions offer many benefits for organizations that need to establish an information management solution quickly, while keeping implementation costs to a minimum. Pre-configured functionality enables businesses to get up and running fast, without requiring time-consuming, costly customization and expensive consultancy services from third-party systems' integrators.

However, many COTS solutions lack flexibility, which impedes an organization's ability to seize new market opportunities and adapt to changing customer needs. Limited configuration options and lack of professional customization support can result in companies being forced to alter their business processes to fit with the technology, rather than the technology fitting their business's actual needs. As a minimum, this results in productivity losses – worse still, a lack of control leading to poor decisions and operational errors.

Furthermore, deploying proprietary coding to extend information management solutions so that they can handle specific company requirements is extremely expensive due to the lack of available developers. Even when companies have deep enough pockets solution extensions are often simply not viable, because the architecture will not support further development, or support agreements with the vendor would be compromised.

Finally, supplier collaboration and the creation of online customer communities are also frequently problematic. Many COTS solutions either do not incorporate intranet and extranet functionality at all – or do not provide the high level of security that is absolutely essential when sharing information with external parties.

FLEXIBILITY – AT A HIGH PRICE

Conversely, custom-developed software promises tailor-made support for your business. For the right price, and given enough time, organizations can acquire solutions that meet all of their mission-critical requirements – improving productivity, increasing process automation and reducing errors.

However, with solutions often poorly defined and inexpertly executed, implementation schedules can easily spiral out of control – with significant disruption to the business. Most importantly, prohibitively high development costs mean that, in practice, this expensive option is available only for large organizations with big budgets.

Poor integration with third-party solutions can also prove to be a headache. In these cases the resulting disparate data 'islands' that grow up across the enterprise can lead to duplication of effort and unwieldy reporting procedures that provide inadequate support for management decision-making.

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FINDING SOME MIDDLE GROUND

With the recent emergence of portal-based information management solutions such as the Claromentis Intranet Framework, it is now possible to get the best of both worlds. Companies can benefit from the high degree of customizability and flexibility they would expect from a bespoke development, but in a cost-effective, pre-packaged, off-the-shelf solution.

However, to identify this perfect middle way – the ‘hybrid’ solution - for their organization, IT decision-makers must ask several key questions:

- **Is the solution easy to configure?**

Companies should look for a solution that is designed to provide businesses with as much flexibility as possible in the way they set up and manage day-to-day operations. Settings should be easy to configure, without the need for specialist technical expertise.

In practice, this means business managers can make changes quickly and easily to update working practices as the organization evolves. For example, a line of business manager may wish to alter the specification of key reporting stages in the opportunities management cycle. With the Claromentis Sales Manager application, for example, he can do this himself without putting in a request to the IT department.

- **What if I want to tailor the solution further?**

As your organization evolves you may wish to introduce changes that cannot be achieved by configuration alone. Having access to professional support on an ongoing basis ensures that you can benefit from informed advice and guidance as you customize your solution, and still have the time to focus on the needs of the business.

Organizations should also bear in mind that, if they wish to extend their solutions still further, they will have access to a wider pool of developers by opting for a solution that is based on open-source technology such as the Claromentis Intranet Framework, rather than a solution based on proprietary technology. This allows you to implement highly bespoke solutions without encountering the prohibitive costs and lack of available expertise associated with development using proprietary codes.

- **What about my remote workers?**

To stay productive mobile employees need to access exactly the same information as their office-based colleagues. By implementing an access-anywhere solution such as the Claromentis Intranet Framework – which enables staff to access all tools and applications simply by logging on to a web-browser – companies can stay agile, keep front-line field staff informed and up-to-date, and respond quickly to changing customer requirements.

- **What about future opportunities?**

Business does not stand still, and the ability to make the most of developments such as the rise of second generation (or Web 2.0) internet-based communities can create significant competitive advantage, by increasing collaboration and supporting innovation. But many organizations lack the tools they need to exploit these new opportunities. By finding a solution that offers *as standard* interactive tools and services such as wikis, blogs and forums, and that enables you to publish multiple websites including permission-based public web pages, you will be well placed to harness the power of the Web 2.0 revolution.

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A WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES

In a successful business the role of IT professionals focuses not just on technical issues, but also on the bigger commercial picture. Technology should not be an inhibitor but an enabler, allowing the organization to pursue and realize its strategic goals.

But faced with inflexible solutions, and tied into expensive proprietary technologies, many IT professionals are still being hampered by seemingly unassailable barriers - budgetary constraints, poor integration with legacy software, lack of remote access and security concerns. What they realize is that this results in IT – meant to support and enhance an organization’s aims – preventing good commercial ideas generated by the business from becoming a reality.

As such, the business environment most organizations find themselves in today provides unique challenges for IT decision-makers. Companies need more than ever the agility to address dynamic markets and adapt to changing customer demands, whilst having budgets closely scrutinized and every investment analyzed for its effect on the bottom line.

As a result, the cost-effectiveness of a COTS solution needs to be merged with the flexibility of custom development to deliver solutions that give companies the economically achievable versatility they need to keep up with – or stay ahead of – market and competitor activity. Now, with COTS solutions such as the Claromentis Intranet Framework marrying controlled cost with support for the business and commercial agility, CIOs finally have the ability to deploy IT solutions that will give the business the freedom to think outside the box – knowing that the IT will be there to deliver. And that leaves just one question: what would you do?

ABOUT CLAROMENTIS



Combining smart business thinking with cutting-edge technological expertise, Claromentis provides COTS solutions for enterprise information management that offer rapid implementation and controlled costs while enabling business flexibility. Based on open source technology, the portal-based Claromentis Intranet Framework allows organizations to establish tailored solutions that fit their precise needs. Offering online access to sophisticated communication and collaboration tools, and enabling workflow automation, Claromentis solutions also provide advanced intranet and extranet capabilities, as well as a range of everyday business applications for document, website content, sales and project management.

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