



How to Choose a Distribution Solution

Sage White Paper

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Introduction

Implementing the proper distribution system can be as strategic and important to your bottom line as expanding your warehouse or bringing on new product lines. After all, implementing the right solution and choosing an experienced solution provider provides both immediate and long-term benefits that can impact your day-to-day business processes across the board. So, naturally, it is important that distributors take the time to clearly define business processes and objectives before starting the search for new distribution software.

There are literally dozens of software products on the market today to help distributors just like you automate and manage day-to-day business requirements, such as accounting, inventory management, order entry, and assembly. The good news is that you have plenty of options. However, many companies feel overwhelmed by the evaluation process because they don't have a road map to help them identify the right distribution systems for their unique business and technical requirements.

Before starting the selection process, it's important to understand your needs and the benefits of having a good system. That's why we've created this guide – to provide you with the essential information you need to make the best decision possible. In the following pages, we'll walk you through the steps of getting started, choosing the right system, and implementing your system.

Tools you want from a Vendor

Many distributors remain relatively small and may never require full-blown enterprise business applications. However, distributors in growth markets or those with aggressive business plans are encouraged to select a business system that can grow with their company - both in terms of transaction volume and increased functionality. By selecting a scalable solution, you can extend your investment for several years while avoiding unnecessary costs to implement a new solution.

Some software publishers provide migration tools to help you move from prepackaged software to more sophisticated business systems. These migration tools sometimes include:

Data Migration

Some business systems provide you with tools to help you migrate data from one system to another. Customers, vendors, items, and other relatively static data are the most common data elements moved into the new system.





Transactional Data

Very few business applications can move transactional data from one application to another. For example, purchase order and sales order history is very different between various applications. Companies that support multiple distribution solutions can migrate some transactional or historical data from entry-level systems to medium and large business applications.

Assisted Setup

A few applications include built-in implementation wizards to help your company get up and running fast on your new business system. These tools help you better understand how areas within the business application interact with each other. For example, warehouses are almost always set up before items. Some applications integrate to project management tools so that project managers can assign tasks to individuals or teams in the company.

Training Guides

Vendors that own multiple solutions sometimes provide guides to ease the transition from one application to another. For example, companies using entry-level products, such as Peachtree by Sage, typically pick, pack, and ship products in one step while larger businesses may require two or three separate steps. In this respect, the training guide helps by stating, "Here's how you used to perform this task and here's how you will perform this task in your new application."

Industry Requirements

Distribution software is often specialized depending on the types of products being sold. For example, some of the most common distribution applications on the market are designed for distributors of industrial products, consumer packaged goods, and high-technology products.

Industry-specific software products are attractive to distributors because they typically provide a dozen or so specific features designed to meet a particular business requirement, such as custom item lookups in the fastener industry or rental management for equipment distributors. However, most popular Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) applications provide 75 to 90 percent or more of the functionality required by distributors. More established ERP vendors have hundreds of third-party enhancements and vertical applications, which often provide the remaining 10 to 25 percent of industry-specific functionality.

It is therefore critical that distributors carefully select their software vendor, since established ERP and distribution software suppliers have demonstrated industry staying power. And due to their size and financial stability, established vendors are unlikely to be assimilated by other companies later on. ERP and accounting software products tend to have much larger installed bases and will likely be supported and enhanced for years to come.

In addition to industry solutions, there are hundreds of add-on and complementary solutions available to provide more advanced features. For example, there are literally hundreds of independent Electronic Data Interchange and Warehouse Management System applications on the market today.

As mentioned earlier, industry and boutique software publishers are generally much smaller than publishers of more general accounting and ERP solutions. Consequently, industry and niche publishers typically allocate most of their research and development to the inventory management, order entry, and purchasing side of their business applications with little investment in accounting, business intelligence, customer relationship management, human resources, asset management, payroll, and other non-distribution capabilities. As such, you should carefully consider all your requirements and look for the best overall solution to meet your needs.





Industries utilising Distribution Solutions

- **Industrial Products**

Distributors of plumbing, HVAC/R, hardware, automotive products, machinery, and equipment.

- **Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG)**

Food, beverage, chemical, and pharmaceutical distributors.

- **High Technology & Electronics**

Technology distributors, such as electronic and electrical component distributors and medical and office product distributors.

- **Apparel**

Apparel and textile product distributors.

- **Building Products**

Concrete, lumber, and wood product distributors.

- **Other Industries**

Petroleum distribution, paper, and book wholesalers, and other specialized industries.

Software Evaluation

Evaluating software can be a very overwhelming task for small and mid-sized distributors due to the sheer quantity of products to choose from and the complexity of each system. Distributors typically manage their evaluation process either in-house or through contracted software consultants and evaluation services.

Some companies prefer to manage the software evaluation process themselves. They typically develop a long list of potential candidates through multiple sources, which may include word-of-mouth references from companies in their industry, Internet searches, online software directories and product reviews, business and trade magazines, distribution association and software trade shows, and other sources. If you're conducting your own software evaluations, it's a good idea to dedicate an employee to the project of collecting and organising information for the evaluation team.

Choosing a Consultant

Consultants have special expertise – they've been through the process many times before and can help you save time and effort. A consultant can help you choose your software, install any needed networks or hardware, and help ensure that your system is up and running by your target date. Your ideal consultant is someone who has installed distribution systems at businesses similar to yours. You will benefit substantially from their expertise.

Questions to Ask your Consultant

Has the consultant installed distribution software at companies similar to yours?

Ask about company size, number of employees, and nature of the business.

Will the consultant provide references?

Ask for contact names so you can call these customers and learn about their implementations.

How are the consultant's fees structured?

Find out up front how your consultant handles hours, services, and billing.

Can the consultant provide a complete service package?

As part of your implementation, you'll need training, technical support, and many other services. Look for a business partner who will work with you from start to finish. You don't want someone whose only focus is on selling software.

What are the costs involved with adding more users or adding more modules for existing users?

When you're running price comparisons, dig a little deeper than initial cost. In addition to considering maintenance and upgrade support and costs, think about how much you'll pay to add on more users. Some packages charge you less than other packages for all modules but gouge you in the cost per number of users, while other companies are relatively inexpensive when it comes to adding seats but charge quite a bit for additional modules.

Who is responsible for technical support?

At some point you will need technical support for your new system. Will you call the software manufacturer or the consultant? How much will technical support cost? Find out what the policies are for maintenance, upgrades, and support. Get clear definitions up front. Ask your consultant what you can expect in support turnaround





times. Some suppliers allow you to control your turnaround time by purchasing a support upgrade package.

Does the consultant listen effectively?

This question separates the true sales consultants from the peddlers. A true professional will not make recommendations for you without learning about your business and your objectives.

Does the consultant communicate clearly?

Avoid resellers who try to impress you with jargon and who immediately start talking about equipment and program features. Your focus during the interview should be on what applications the consultant can provide and how he or she can help you benefit from them – not on details.

Do you think you can work with the consultant?

You'll be working with the consultant over a period of weeks. You may even end up with a long-term relationship if the consultant helps change and extend your system as your company grows. Choose a consultant who is a good fit with your company's philosophy and culture. Trust your instincts if you don't feel right about the consultant. You need someone with whom you feel comfortable.

Choosing a Software Vendor

It's important to realize that you're not only selecting a distribution system – you're also choosing a company as well. Here is a more in-depth look at the factors to consider when choosing a software vendor to use:

No Technology Lock-in

While you are exploring software applications, you should make sure that your selection does not leave you tied to a particular solution or vendor. Doing so can be risky and uncertain. You may be spending a great deal of money on bells and whistles that you honestly don't need and will never use. Worse yet, you may end up with obsolete technology that will cost you when it comes time to replace it. Choosing a vendor that offers you the freedom to choose among multiple products like Linux and Windows, multiple databases, and multiple operating systems is the key to avoiding technology lock-in.

A Large Installed Base

How many organisations around the world are using the company's software? How many resellers does it have? If the company

you're considering has a large installed base of current users, it's a good bet that it's probably doing something right. People and organisations vote with their checkbooks; a popular product is a good sign that a company is stable and customer-friendly. A large installed base also has a second benefit: third-party software manufacturers will be more likely to offer add-on software, worthwhile utilities, product training, and other benefits that you can utilise once you install the software.

Frequent Updates

Good software suppliers update their software frequently. They also make bug fixes available quickly and easily to resellers and customers. Before you make a purchase, find out if the software publisher has a maintenance program in place that gives you access to updates as they become available.

An Upgrade Path

This is similar to scalability mentioned earlier. A good software company invests heavily in engineering and develops new product features and enhancements regularly. It stays abreast of new technologies and makes sure that its customers do too – particularly those customers with a quickly growing business.

A software upgrade – where you move to a similar but more powerful product – can give your company flexibility as it grows. Software upgrades also are desirable as they often cost far less than the retail price of the full program. Imagine purchasing a new car a year ago, and then seeing this year's model and wanting some of the new features. You can't have those new features unless you purchase the new model! A good software manufacturer, however, will provide product upgrades at reasonable prices or as part of a yearly service agreement.

Suggested Planning Schedule

The following is a simple five-step process for successfully analyzing, selecting, implementing, and using a new distribution system:

Step 1: Pre-planning

This includes a review of your current system's capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as the initial list of what you want to do with your new system but are unable to do with your old system.





Step 2: Intelligence gathering

Information is critical to sound decision making. The more and better information you can obtain now about the various distribution systems being considered will help you in the long run.

Step 3: Analysis

Careful review of the information gathered is necessary for making sound decisions. Please note that this step may include actual software demonstrations, visiting organisations with the software already installed, and perhaps even a visit to the vendor's headquarters.

Step 4: Implementation

Once a distribution system solution has been chosen, you should now begin implementation. This may last weeks or months, and include data conversion, user training, and other elements.

Step 5: Post-implementation review

This step includes the ongoing monitoring and review of the system. Is it performing as expected? What elements need to be modified, changed, or customised? What optional elements can be added to further enhance system performance?

Can You Afford to Buy?

The benefits of implementing a distribution system are well known and well documented. But it still may be difficult to persuade the management of your company to part with hard-earned profits for the new system you're proposing. Consider preparing a return on investment (ROI) analysis to help your company decide how much to pay for the new system. Start by categorising your costs:

Software Costs

These include software purchase or lease, maintenance fees, and add-on products or packages required to adapt the system to your needs.

Hardware Costs

These include computers, components, networks, and printers. Costs can be difficult to project until you make your software selection. You probably already have most of the hardware you'll need, but you may need to upgrade servers or storage devices to accommodate a new system.



Consulting Costs

You'll want an experienced consultant to help you select and plan your system implementation. Fees vary regionally and depend substantially on your desire to "do it yourself" or to offload excess work to an expert.

Overtime Costs

During implementation, you and your staff will have more work than usual. You may have to hire temporary employees to handle some administrative tasks or ask for overtime from your employees.

Training Costs

You'll need training to get people up and running on the new system. Good training is a logical investment in the success of the project since it can save many hours of expensive backtracking. Training costs are lower than ever, thanks to Internet "virtual" classrooms that reduce travel time and fit education into busy schedules.

Can You Afford Not to Buy?

If you're adding up your costs right now, they may seem huge. But to complete your ROI calculation, you'll also need to add up the savings your system will deliver. Results vary dramatically from one company to another, depending on objectives and work styles. But a good system will definitely deliver significant cost savings:

Reduced Inventory Shrinkage

With the right tracking and improved accountability, a good system can help you keep track of inventory and prevent losses. As a result, more of your purchased inventory ends up in final goods. If you're an average manufacturer, plan on reducing shrinkage from your current rates to a rate of about one percent.

Reduced Cost of Goods Through Improved Purchasing

With better forecasting, you'll be able to plan your buying to avoid peak pricing, rush charges, and small orders. Based on our customers' experiences, and depending on the products you buy, component costs can be reduced by 10 percent or more, rush charges can be cut as much as 90 percent, and shipping costs can be lowered by 10 percent to 50 percent or more. Lower costs may also result in improved payment history for your company's credit report.





Reduced Labor Costs

With better scheduling and more accessible data, you'll need fewer people to get the same work done. Often, a new system can dramatically reduce administrative costs while bringing overtime labor into check through improved schedules. Depending on the nature of the company and the current rates of overtime, labor savings range from 5 percent to 50 percent.

Could Your Company Do Better?

Calculate your own ROI by adding up your savings and dividing it by your estimated costs. In our experience, most companies save 10 to 30 percent on inventory holding costs. You can make this quick ROI calculation if you know the approximate value of your present inventory. You may be amazed to learn that many companies find that a new distribution system pays for itself in a matter of months.

Conclusion

Not all distribution systems are created equal. Each product and vendor has their strengths and weaknesses. Some systems provide rich industry-specific functionality but lack fundamental accounting features while others provide a broader feature set, which can be customised to meet the needs of many different distribution environments. Further, many small companies automate their accounting and inventory processes before tackling their warehouse management and extended supply chain systems. These companies must prepare themselves for a huge leap in terms of the investment they make and training required to implement a more sophisticated business application.

A defined software evaluation process will help you identify the best solution to meet your needs. In addition, information gleaned from the evaluation process should be used during the implementation process to keep the project on track and on budget. Successful implementations can reap huge company-wide benefits, including significant reductions in data entry, elimination of data entry errors, improved system security, and significant improvements to your company's bottom line.

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