



Charting ECM's Course from Document Management to Enterprise Information Hub

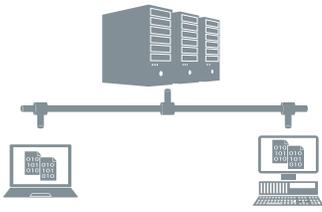
RESEARCH THAT ALL SAP USERS SHOULD KNOW

Enterprise content management's role as a centralized document repository is well established, and organizations are readily benefiting from basic screen-level integrations that serve up documents in the context of core business systems. However, ECM's value increases exponentially when leveraged as an information hub between line-of-business (LOB) systems, like SAP, working to facilitate key processes, keep data in sync, and maximize investments in existing applications.

Information is the lifeblood of organizations, yet most companies still struggle to find data strewn across disconnected silos, many containing related but inconsistent material. The challenge of managing data across independent systems is made that much more difficult by today's ever-increasing volumes.

A new IDG Research Services survey finds that organizations manage, on average, 48 LOB applications containing critical business information, while a quarter of organizations juggle more than 100 applications.

Companies that haven't made the leap to integrate ECM with LOB applications face an even tougher challenge making effective and efficient use of critical business data. This group, highly reliant on manual, hard-to-manage processes, remains a dominant force: The IDG survey shows an alarming 69% of respondents still rely on network file servers to share and manage documents, while nearly half (47%) depend on Microsoft Office SharePoint to store and access documents related to data housed in LOB applications.



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SOURCE: IDG Research

ECM's core document management capabilities, entrenched in many businesses, are helping companies make headway with the problem by consolidating and centralizing some, but not all, critical information. The IDG survey finds that 66% of organizations currently utilize document management/ECM systems, with 68% of those going as far as to integrate ECM with their LOB applications. For those respondents that are already integrating their ECM and LOB systems, most are simply providing access to documents from the application screen using custom scripting (62%) or a URL (59%).

While providing access to documents has proven benefits, it doesn't go far enough to ensure users have access to the right data at the right time. One of the primary challenges has to do with how ECMs and LOB systems work together as part of an overall business process. Because the footprint of a particular business process—servicing a customer request or handling an insurance claim, for example—falls outside of the footprint of any one application or even the ECM, the requisite data is not always easily accessible, especially in real time. Moreover, silos of disconnected information don't support any form of seamless data integration, so human involvement is required to communicate and share data.

As a result, information held across multiple systems can pose a real headache for business users. More than half (53%) of respondents to the IDG survey report that information housed in multiple systems is too often out of sync, causing processing delays as data is updated across relevant systems. About half of survey respondents report spending too much time searching for critical documents in multiple locations, and the same amount flag an overreliance on paper as one more impediment to productivity, slowing down business processes and compounding inefficiencies.

Data fragmentation and disconnected systems place a drain on user productivity in other ways. With critical business informa-

tion out of reach, employees get drawn into a cycle of second-guessing data, which results in far too much time devoted to low-value workaround tasks, including verifying data or hunting for supporting content—a complaint raised by 44% of the survey respondents.

Companies are also at far greater risk when business users are forced to rely on outdated or incomplete data. Manual, labor-intensive processes for sharing common data between core systems can lead to inaccuracies, which in turn inhibit sound decision making and ultimately could negatively impact a firm's competitive edge. This scenario runs counter to most companies' top-ranked business priorities, which are revenue growth and improved profitability, according to 80% of the survey respondents.

CURRENT SOLUTION MIX FALLS SHORT

Yet where there's a will, there's a way, and companies have definitely been experimenting with workarounds designed to address the problems associated with data fragmentation and disconnected systems. While over half of the organizations (51%) surveyed say they are now sharing and updating data across LOB applications containing related information, they admit they aren't doing so very easily.

Almost half of the survey participants (48%) are achieving a level of data synchronization via custom programming efforts, either by working directly with APIs or writing their own custom integration interfaces. Despite the fact that two-thirds of the companies using these methods have formalized the process of creating and maintaining code over time, they still admit the complexities of custom coding are problematic and their efforts



are not always successful.

Custom coding is time-consuming and resource-intensive, requiring an investment in specific expertise, either through dedicated IT staffers or via costly outsourcing or consulting services. Additionally, custom-coded solutions tend to rely on point-to-point communication, which can easily be disrupted in the event of a network outage or application failure. When this happens, data en route between systems can be permanently and irretrievably lost.

A deeper dive into the research shows that half of responding organizations dedicate more than 20% of their IT budgets to custom integrations, whether that's day-to-day maintenance or facilitating more complex upgrades. Of those respondents immersed in custom-code integration projects, nearly half report it requires two or more business days to test and validate the code during an upgrade, which is time that could be far better served pursuing IT projects that innovate or deliver added value to the business.

Custom integration can be even more difficult when the task spans multiple, diverse applications, which has increasingly become the norm. The IDG survey reveals that one-third of respondents are dealing with upwards of 16 applications that require some level of custom coding. Respondents in North America have even more applications to integrate compared with other geographies, adding to their burden. The larger the custom coding effort, the more time IT has to spend on generating and testing upgrades, not to mention delivering support.

Aside from custom coding, the other primary means of integration is through manual data entry, cited by 41% of respondents, or via flat-file exchange, an approach employed by 46% of the group. Manual data entry is a labor-intensive, error-prone process, not sustainable for effective data sharing over the long term and unable to support a real-time exchange. Flat-file methods, while relatively easy to implement and generally inexpensive, also don't support real-time data exchange, which means data is static and there are no guarantees that multiple

information sources will remain in sync.

The predominance of companies that have yet to achieve real-time synchronous communication between ECM and LOB applications (90%) feel that gaining a real-time, guaranteed data exchange capability is important, with over half (56%) of respondents stating it is *critical* to do so. Despite their best intentions, companies still face a variety of hurdles standing in the way of better integration. Forty-six percent of survey participants cite lack of budget as a primary roadblock to achieving the desired results, while 43% are hamstrung by the lack of available IT resources.

For those that are achieving a real-time, guaranteed exchange of data between their applications, the majority are doing so with expensive and/or inefficient tools as noted above.

Clearly, the market is ready for a more effective solution that will deliver on the promise of guaranteed, real-time data exchange.

ECM: THE ROUTE TO A BETTER WAY

An ECM solution that can provide a real-time, guaranteed data exchange between applications can play a different role, transitioning from being a document repository to serving as an enterprise information hub. When guaranteed data exchange is orchestrated by dedicated servers within an enterprise-class infrastructure, outdated integration methods such as custom code, APIs, and flat-file exchanges become obsolete.

Guaranteed delivery, a hallmark of such a server-based ECM hub, provides resiliency against disruptions such as network connectivity failures or server overloads. Such a solution issues automated notifications to confirm successful delivery, eliminating the need to double-check and update information in different applications while ensuring there are no productivity-sapping time delays to reinitiate or manually execute a data exchange. In addition to speeding up processes, guaranteed delivery is also instrumental in reducing errors that lead to inaccurate decision making—a boon to organizations seeking to maximize their information assets. The value of a guaranteed data exchange is also far superior to flat-file exchanges or custom-developed integrations, due to the fact that this will ensure the delivery of data even when one of the applications is down for a period of time, either through failure or for maintenance. The integration server will cache all the changes and ensure they happen when the server comes back online.

Deploying an ECM solution as an enterprise information hub has other advantages. The ECM hub automatically orchestrates key business processes, synchronizing information managed by the system in real time with tasks and activities initiated by



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SOURCE: IDG Research



OnBase serves as an information hub between your organization's systems, orchestrating a real-time, guaranteed exchange of data between these applications and provides your users with instant access to all of the information they need, directly from the screens of their familiar core applications.

“With an ECM solution as the central point of integration, we're able to bring users a consistent point of service and reduce the amount of time they spend flipping back and forth between different systems.”

—Mary Schmidt
business analysis and quality
assurance manager

other mission-critical LOB systems. By doing so, users are able to work in the LOB systems with which they are most familiar while accessing critical documents and other supporting materials—without having to flip back and forth between screens and systems. Moreover, users are also able to access related documents and data in the context of a particular business process or set of tasks, which greatly simplifies the workflow.

Unlike custom-coded integrations, which require a very specific skill set, an ECM solution deployed as an enterprise information hub should offer a more intuitive environment for easily creating integrations. Specifically, the ECM solution should support a GUI-based environment that lets business users or IT personnel intuitively and quickly establish a connection between it and the

LOB applications without a requirement for programming.

By leveraging ECM as an enterprise information hub, companies are assured a number of compelling benefits. The combination of accurate and current information and the ability to work within the context of a specific business process boosts user productivity while creating a more natural and less disruptive path to effective decision making. From an infrastructure perspective, IT is unencumbered by the laborious and costly maintenance process of writing and troubleshooting custom integrations. Finally, there are productivity gains associated with trading up a one-off custom programming effort with a repeatable process that demands fewer IT resources.

At Clicks Group Limited of Cape Town, South Africa, positioning its ECM solution as an enterprise information hub has radically changed how users at the retail company work. With the ECM solution serving as a seamless, real-time central repository information hub for SAP, users are enjoying a much more streamlined working experience, which makes them far more productive, notes Paul Niemantinga, accounts payable director.

“Staff immediately access more than 99 percent of invoices electronically,” Niemantinga says. “Users don't even need to leave the SAP system to find them. They just click in SAP and the related ECM documents pop up.”

CONCLUSION

As Clicks Group Limited and many other companies are discovering, organizations can no longer afford to be saddled by silos of disconnected systems given the pace of business today. ECM, already entrenched as a central document repository, can play a much more significant role beyond delivering quick access to critical documents. When used as an enterprise information hub, ECM can replace inefficient manual tasks with automated business processes that propel companies on the path to the confident decision making that leads to a competitive edge.

To learn more, go to
OnBase.com/SAP.

Note: The participants in this survey were not exclusively SAP users.