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ECM: Enterprise Content Mania

You already know that you need a better way to manage the "knowledge" generated in your enterprise. You've heard such a solution (or combination of solutions) exists. Where do you go from there?

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Written by [Jay McCall](#)

Rule 1: Any time a business technology acronym has the word "enterprise" as the meaning to one of its letters, you can bet two things are true. First, the definition of the acronym will refer to a mysterious, all-encompassing answer to some universal business problem. Second, there will be as many different definitions of the acronym as there are vendors trying to sell it. Each definition, not surprisingly, will align the given vendor's solution with the exact remedy for your company's pain points.

In The Beginning: Document Management

To get a better handle on this beclouded term and to understand what it is capable of doing for your organization, it's best to start from the beginning. In the early 1980s companies wanted to find a way to manage electronic as well as paper-based documents. Companies like FileNet (1982) and Gauss Interprises (1983) heeded the call with DM (document management) solutions. About 10 years later, when the Internet emerged as a novelty for posting text and images (e.g. online company brochures), enterprises saw value in managing content (e.g. HTML, text, JPEG images) on the Web. Such vendors as Interwoven (1995) and Vignette (1995) tackled this new enterprise challenge with WCM (Web content management). By the end of the millennium, as the Internet evolved into a business tool, enterprises wanted one view of all their data. It is this desire - to have one solution that could seamlessly manage all the data within an enterprise - that led to ECM's emergence within the last year. "True ECM entails managing unstructured data throughout its life cycle," says Karen Shegda, research director for Gartner. "It is the convergence between DM and WCM." The confusion surrounding ECM goes beyond what its name implies: managing structured and unstructured data. Equally as important to this management functionality (e.g. auditing data, workflow, archival, version control, and security) is the way data is presented (e.g. via portal, intranet, Internet, catalog, or wireless device) along with the business rules and personalized formatting that drives the content presentation.

ECM Alleviates These Pain Points

How do you know if your company needs an ECM system? Check out the Yankee Group's top seven list on this page titled "Is Your Company's Web Site..." If these pain points sound too familiar, you're a candidate for ECM...or the DM plus WCM equivalent. Check out what the content management experts have to say regarding the age-old debate of the whole being equal to the sum of its parts.

"There really isn't one complete ECM suite," says Shegda. "By purchasing an ECM solution from one vendor, rather than a point solution for DM or WCM, there will be tradeoffs. You won't get all the bells and whistles that multiple niche DM or WCM vendors can offer."

John Salimbene, VP of marketing for HandySoft (Vienna, VA), a workflow vendor, agrees with Shegda's statement. "ECM vendors are good at getting static data from multiple sources into one location, but they lack the ability to maintain the value of the data as it's shared throughout the organization," says Salimbene. "A workflow solution solves this problem by tracking data throughout its life cycle." For example, a workflow solution can be used for insurance claims. First, a data entry clerk inputs data to a general claim form. After the form is complete, data from the first form populates parts of a second form, which is used by a claims adjuster. The claims adjuster completes

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the form after determining the value of the claim and the money to be awarded to the claimant. After the claims adjuster completes the claim form, the document cannot be altered by anyone who is not authorized to change it. By using workflow, organizations not only can automate the data generation process, but they can keep track of authors, revision numbers, security, and dates of completion.

Tom Kuhr, VP of marketing and product management for Day Software (Newport Beach, CA), an ECM vendor, agrees partly with Shegda's statement about ECM vendors not being able to provide one complete suite. "As a whole, ECM vendors that rely on a central repository for pulling data from applications and data sources into a silo cannot meet the needs of every enterprise," says Kuhr. "For a solution to truly be enterprise-wide in scope - especially in a global sense - it must be able to work with data in its original location and at the same time be system agnostic." Day's philosophy is that the majority of ECM solutions will never be able to become truly global because they take a central repository approach. This approach requires the enterprise's data to be duplicated, reformatted, and dumped into one database before the content management solution can perform core operations on the data and make it useful for the organization. The only way to manage enterprise content properly is to manage data from its source via a virtual repository. One example of the benefit of a virtual repository can be seen with a medical device company that wants to allow its salesforce to have access to pictures of its products via multiple devices such as catalogs, PCs, and PDAs (personal digital assistants). With a typical content management system each image would have to be copied three times and formatted for each device within the central repository. With a virtual repository, on the other hand, one image is created and only the instructions for how the image is to be displayed are stored in the repository by using XML (extensible markup language) tags.

Mike Ball, VP of marketing for SER Solutions (Dulles, VA), a knowledge management vendor, warns potential ECM buyers about other shortfalls with an all-in-one ECM solution. "Most ECM vendors have a solution with built-in search and retrieval tools that they falsely claim is knowledge management," says Ball. "True knowledge management goes beyond searching by keywords and uses artificial intelligence that is able to search words using context clues - much like a person learns language."

To illustrate the difference between a typical search engine, which most ECM solutions use, and knowledge management, Ball uses the example of searching for the word "cold" on the Internet. "The search engine finds hundreds of thousands of sites with the word 'cold' contained in the text, most of which use a different definition of cold (e.g. temperature vs. virus vs. computer output to laser disk) than the user intended. This method of searching for data wastes a lot of time. By using a true knowledge management search engine, on the other hand, the user can paste a paragraph that includes the word 'cold' in the context of weather in Alaska and can have the right information available."

Look For A Performance Guarantee

Before deciding whether to purchase a DM solution and a WCM solution separately or to buy an ECM solution, Shegda recommends potential buyers have the following information available about their current technology and needs:

- 1.) A list of platforms used within the organization. For example, does accounting use a UNIX-based system and purchasing a Windows NT server?
- 2.) What kind of client interfaces does the solution (or solutions) support? Some may use a Web browser, while others may require a Windows client on every desktop.
- 3.) Integration with enterprise applications. The solution should be able to integrate to any enterprise application with minimal programming.
- 4.) What kinds of e-mail does the system support? In some cases ECM solutions support Microsoft Outlook or Lotus Notes as a client and allow users to save content to the repository through the e-mail client.
- 5.) What databases does it support (e.g. Oracle or SQL)?

6.) What is the financial status of the vendor?

7.) Do they work with large system integrators or is their implementation more mom and pop?

8.) How is their service and support? They shouldn't charge more than 18% (the industry average) of the software costs for support and maintenance.

9.) Check references. Ideally, you should talk to customers within your vertical market, similar in size, and find out how the solution works for them.

If a vendor meets all nine criteria, see if you can try the product. Even if the vendor installs a scaled-down version (i.e. they only pull selected data sources instead of all your data) during the trial period, it will be worth taking a look.

Hopefully you'll be fortunate enough to find one vendor that meets all your enterprise data management needs. But, if you have to go for the best of breed approach by integrating a DM solution and a WCM solution, that's okay, too. Even though you'll be dealing with more tech support people and initial integration issues, the extra bells and whistles should offset any drawbacks.

Send comments to: Webmaster@corrpub.com

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