

Big themes in... Mid-market applications

Integrating modules

ANY BUSINESS THAT NEEDS MORE THAN JUST Microsoft Office to run its business is faced with a fundamental choice: Buy everything from one vendor or the best parts from many?

Buying everything from one vendor can be tempting. This approach provides a single source for problem resolution, and integration costs should be minimal. However, there are risks. An organisation that buys from one vendor places itself completely in the hands of that vendor. Future price hikes and restrictive licensing agreements may be unavoidable, and it will be hard to swap out for better or more advanced functionality if the vendor falls behind in the market.

A best-of-breed approach may provide the highest business functionality, but this may also mean a longer, more expensive implementation cycle. Users are also more exposed to market changes: shifting business requirements or failing vendors can have a big impact on support and maintenance costs.

A hybrid approach may help users to negate risks and cost. By buying a core application stack from a single vendor, users can cut integration

costs. Adding best-in-class components to this backbone can ensure that companies achieve the best functionality in areas that are important.

Selecting this core infrastructure needs to be based on more than functionality, however. The ability to integrate with other applications is key to this strategy, since any missing functionality needs to be provided by other applications.

The growing maturity of web services interfaces promises to make this type of integration much easier. Integration middleware can connect a large number of applications, and the skills necessary to deploy the web services-based middleware are more available and cheaper than skills in proprietary languages and technology.

In the longer term, service-oriented architecture will make application integration even easier. The componentisation of applications will simplify adding functionality or replacing applications. But in the short term, mid-market organisations should look at which vendors have the long-term stability, broad application portfolio and dedication to openness needed to provide a strong foundation for their application infrastructure. ■