

Best-of-Breed Software Solutions: The Hidden Gotchas

by Alec Pettersen

Choosing software for your media enterprise involves more than visiting an App Store—like one does for the iPhone or Droid. Given how comprehensive and prolific software systems are for media companies, no longer can you just choose “the right app” for a specific function. Now that there are so many software systems—apps—in your enterprise, it is critical that one consider how all of the apps will work together to support your overall business needs.

One of the most popular philosophies in choosing the enterprise software today is going with “Best of Breed” (BoB) solutions. By following such an approach, a company’s IT executives take the best software for singular purposes and, in essence, plug it all together to create a full operational system. Simply put, the sentiment is that media enterprises are best served when they find the best of the best—and string them together. This paper will present the questions that must be answered when selecting a “best of breed” set of software solutions.

Determining What Works Best

Software tools for the media enterprise have traditionally been developed as single purpose applications to address a specific business function. It’s relatively easy for some media industry domain experts to team up with software develop-

ers to offer a software tool that makes their particular expertise available to anyone. This low barrier to entry has resulted in a myriad of apps that address everything from CRM, to generating sales proposals, to managing inventory, to distribution and delivery.

Choosing individual software tools without worrying about how they work together perpetuates the operational silos that get in the way of organizational efficiency. The first question that most media companies forget to ask is:

Does your organization have an IT strategy aligned with the overall needs of the business and a plan for getting there, or are you letting individual departments call the shots?

A popular answer for some time to solving the integration problem is to select a single vendor to provide a suite of applications. In essence, by either buying from one company everything—or building it in-house—the idea was that a holistic IT strategy was de facto created. The primary disadvantage of this approach is that each individual application may not offer the best functionality or exactly the right workflow. Of course the main benefit is integrating the parts of the solution remains the job of a single vendor.

After a number of large enterprises—many internationally—implemented this “strategy,” a number of challenges emerged.

1. Is the peace of mind and single “neck to choke” worth the reduced performance and functionality of the integrated suite? Whether built by a single vendor or completed with coders in house, such solutions generally do not keep pace with feature development. In today’s business environment software vendors must continuously monitor competitive products and plan to offer new features and functions.

2. Is the feature and/or specific functionality your organization needs already on the roadmap for a future release, or could you negotiate it to be included? If it is—or you can drive that decision with an in-house development team—the decision in favor of a single vendor solution may still work best for the media enterprise.



can vanish once you’ve contracted with a single vendor. The cost of integrating to a system from another vendor or completely replacing the suite may be so high that you are effectively “locked in”

Because of these questions and challenges, the more popular approach is to select “best of breed” applications from the offerings of several vendors. This will probably please the individual departments as the application that best meets their current—and future—workflows can be identified. For instance, in choosing how to manage the sales through billing process, by allowing best-of-breed software selection: Sales could get the proposal generator they favor, Traffic could keep their familiar system, and accounting chooses their favorite choice as well.

Like any philosophy—business or otherwise—there are holes in the logic. While departments get to manage their operations individually, a number of crucial questions must be answered. (If not, then a holistic IT strategy will fail.)

The Hidden Gotchas!

For many media executives, though, this became a challenge to constantly negotiate, barter, or demand that a single-solution vendors’ software remain cutting edge or competitive. Keep in mind that much of your leverage to negotiate future pricing and features

What seems like a win-win strategy (E.g., keeping departments happy and enabling IT to only chase one company for support) often breaks down. The ability to cobble together a functioning system when no single company other than the client is

responsible for making it all work together, is a great challenge.

The single biggest “gotcha” of the best-of-breed solution is the ongoing planning and integration support required. While most media enterprises are adept at managing towards a successful live date, making everything work once is easy. Making an integrated solution work over time is very challenging—and, potentially, costly.

Therefore, before diving head first into the BoB approach, there are a number of questions that a company’s management should address.

- *Does a company IT strategy exist? If so, does it—via budget and staffing—support maintenance of many individual software applications?*

- *Are the expectations / requirements of the company as a whole clearly spelled out?*

Best-of-Breed solutions are generally purchased by individual departments. These departments know what they want

but more often than don’t understand the impact to the entire ecosystem.

- *Have other integrations between multiple software vendors been successfully executed? In your enterprise? In others? The old adage is definitely true here: past behavior is the best indicator of future behavior. If a similar best-of-breed solution has been integrated at another media enterprise, most likely it can be replicated at your facility. If not, how willing to cooperate*

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is this set of vendors? Are they more likely to remain competitors through the integration process or work to satisfy the customer?

- *Who will handle the integration and testing, and how will future enhancements be handled? Will it be the vendors, a third party, or your IT organization? The answer will not only determine additional cost—whether the client is paying for more vendor resources or is supplying them internally—for the overall solution, but will also impact quality and schedule. Just because a vendor understands what the media enterprise is trying to achieve does not mean they will test for it appropriately.*

- *Do the chosen applications support a Service Oriented Architecture (SOA)? SOA is widely accepted as the preferred approach to integration*

since interfaces use standard protocols that can be quick to create and modify. SOA promotes business agility as new services can be rapidly introduced with

minimal impact to existing services. Has the vendor successfully deployed SOA?

Answers to these questions will help you to address whether or not a company should choose the BoB approach, but they also have a major impact on the cost of developing and maintaining integrations between applications. At the end of the day, someone must address these issues—and it is naïve to think that the software partners will.

Just like your overall business is growing and changing—so are the vendors. It's important to remember software applications are constantly evolving and never finished—unless, of course, the vendor has decided to kill a product due to merger, acquisition or a change in roadmap direction. (A different problem not to be covered in this white paper.) Unexpected changes, due to a partners' business evolution, present another “gotcha.”

Therefore, it is paramount that you develop an ongoing communication review with your vendors. In these reviews you should discuss:

- What do the vendors' product roadmaps look like? Are there shifts in features, functionalities and technology that will affect the integrated system?
- What are the near-term and short-term software fixes? As no software is perfect, what “bugs” are being addressed by when—and how will this impact the entire system and your internal workflows?
- What industry best practices is the vendor seeing at other media enterprises? Could these provide benefit if implemented within your facility?

To insure that these reviews are scheduled, it is recommended that language in the vendors' contract be added. A handshake agreement to address ongoing development isn't sufficient; you must protect the overall system strategy with a guarantee that you will have visibility into changes for planning and budgeting purposes.

Additionally, to maintain a bi-directional communication path, it is critical to com-

municate to the vendor what changes your business will be making. In essence, the more that a vendor knows about your company, the deeper a partnership can develop for overall success. Sharing the business roadmap above the feature/functionality needs is valuable for a vendor as well. Changes being made within your media enterprise may match internal changes within your vendors. Creating a joint business roadmap is the clearest way to avoid any development pitfalls that will impact the overall stability of the system—and your business growth path.

Similar open-communication between your disparate vendors is also a challenging gotcha to overcome. While trust can be established between you and an individual vendor, now you must navigate tricky waters: how to create open-communication and accountability between the vendors themselves. Although there are a number of software vendors that claim to be partners with each other, the time and effort to create trusting relationships is not a priority. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the media enterprise to:

- Require vendors to openly share information as it relates to your specific system with each other, beyond just pitching files over the fence
- Create communication channels and relationships between key vendors that will solve problems and insure escalation of issues, and
- Host roundtable reviews of software roadmaps and issues on a regular basis.

Again, it is not enough to have a “handshake” between the vendors. At the end of

the day, your specific integrated workflows are not their problems. They aren't. In the very cordial—but competitive—media software community, bringing different companies together to resolve your BoB needs must be considered a key management responsibility.

Finally, the hardest “gotcha” to avoid is building a custom system that is so unique only a handful of individuals can maintain it. Throughout the industry, a number of 20+ year old, legacy, customized BoB software systems live in infamy; these are maintained by a handful of IT or business analyst staff that are the only ones that can “MacGuyver” the solution and keep it running. Not only is this a problem for new feature and functionality development but also it is a significant risk to the overall operations. In essence, managing to such IT golden handcuffs is untenable.

Therefore, it is paramount that all elements of the BoB solution be fully documented. Simply put, no one likes to document software systems. And, in the rush to have integrated systems go live, documentation is generally one of the first tasks to be eliminated. (It's so easy to say, “We'll get to this later!”)

It is actually during this critical phase of implementation that it is easiest to document what is being integrated—and how. Again, vendors are generally not responsible for handling this task; rather, it is the responsibility of the media enterprise to document its unique system. This is not only a guarantee for better problem-solv-

ing in the future, but also the only way to truly protect the asset. An ROI can only be developed for a system that can be leveraged and maximized. This, for software, is managed through the ability to create, develop, and maintain the asset.

Leveraging the BoB Solution

It is widely recognized that media enterprises are different, and unique BoB solutions provide a way to manage this uniqueness. Not only can BoB solutions provide better visibility throughout the organization of operational processes but they can streamline efforts, eliminating a number of manual processes. These are only a handful of the benefits of tight integration

between software systems—which increase the ROI of the system exponentially.

Without fully understanding the “gotchas” of BoB solutions, many media

enterprises could end up spending more than necessary to build, manage, maintain and staff such solutions. Employing a neutral expert in media software solutions, like a consulting firm, during the system planning and selection process will insure that individual departmental needs are properly balanced against the overall needs of the organization.

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About the Author

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