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Gaining a competitive advantage through software



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Smart companies deploy information technology to gain an advantage over their competitors. However, technology itself is not always enough to maintain that advantage. The real benefits come from the way the improvements are implemented.

Regardless of the industry you operate in, there is a bewildering array of off-the-shelf software packages available to address the needs of your company. In haulage, there are specific packages for transport planning, weighbridges, tachograph compliance, fuel management, vehicle management and tracking; and that's before you consider generic business applications like accounts systems.

Whilst each application might serve its purpose well, what if your needs aren't an exact match to the off-the-shelf offering? What if you aren't prepared to compromise your business processes, which have been built up over many years of trading and make you stronger than your competitors?

An alternative route is bespoke software.

Bespoke software has many advantages. Firstly, it can be designed to exactly suit your requirements, matching the way you want to work. Typically, this mirrors existing working practices, therefore, once installed, users require little supervision or training. By mirroring an existing process, many of the once manual steps can be automated, increasing productivity.

Another key differentiator with bespoke software is the licensing. It is often possible to obtain all rights to the software developed for you. This gives you complete control over your software and your company's destiny, as opposed to the 'off-the-shelf' software route,

where you may have to comply with the upgrade paths and wishes of your vendor or else risk losing support.

System integration possibilities are also increased with bespoke development as disparate sources of information are incorporated into the new applications. For example: integrating information from the fuel management system, accounts, and transport systems to give high-level management reports at the click of a button.

These benefits are great, however, the overriding advantage is that bespoke software can exploit the strategic potential within a company that differentiates it from its competitors. By accepting off-the-shelf 'industry standard' packages, you are purchasing a system that has been compromised to address the requirements of many companies. In effect, it has been designed by a committee and will contain the minimum functionality required to keep everyone happy. Invariably, this will be far greater than the functionality you require and will compromise your unique business processes.

As an example, Valley Technology were contracted by the Edinburgh based Waste and Recycling organisation NWH Group in April 2006 to design and build a bespoke operations system to integrate and speed the flow of information through the company. This was covered in the May 2006 edition of FACTS.



The systems in place were on the whole manually-driven and paper-based. At the time, Mark Williams, MD of NWH Group said: "Our biggest problem to stop us growing at the moment is paperwork."

At a systems level, the root of the problem faced by NWH was caused by disconnected systems. Whilst you may recognise this issue in your own business, the expert processes that you've built up over the years will be different enough from NWH Group to make an 'off-the-shelf' solution for both companies impossible.

In designing the new system for NWH, a literal paper trail was followed in order to map out the business process. The new system integrates sales, transport, weighbridges and accounts

departments. The time taken to process an order through to invoicing has been cut by a matter of weeks, representing a significant improvement in cashflow and removing administrative barriers to help with the continued success and growth of the business.

For bespoke software projects to be successful, it is vital to first realise the issue (or opportunity) facing the business. It then requires constant communication and feedback from all parties throughout the development process to ensure the successful delivery. If this seems like needless effort when there are off-the-shelf applications available, remember that when buying off-the-shelf, you are making your processes indistinguishable from your competitors who purchase the same system.

A distinctive process is at the heart of competitive advantage. Bespoke software should be used to capture and embrace this.

Edinburgh based Valley Technology is a long-established provider of IT services and bespoke software development to a wide range of industry sectors. Focused on the automation of business process, Valley Technology develop and support cost-effective, enterprise-class systems to improve business areas including Customer Relationship Management, Warehouse Management, Sales and Purchase Order Processing, Transport Management, Invoicing, and Integrated Proof of Delivery systems using GPRS-enabled hand-helds.

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