Choose the Best ERP System for your Organization

While we don't always refer to our management systems as ERP's or Enterprise Resource Planning software, the software systems that we use to manage large volumes of data indeed help us each day to do our jobs. The ERP system is essentially the "brain" or "backbone" of your organization's operations, helping to ensure that processes are maintained, information is moved from one area to another, and people have the most current information they need in order to perform their role. As the brain of the organization, it is also the central data repository – or the central point where all of the data is stored – and thus – the one source of truth.

Why upgrade your ERP system?

In order for your company's operations to run smoothly, ensuring that you are maintaining an effective control center that integrates with other parts of the system is critical. Integration with other systems allows users to avoid inefficiencies such as double-entry, keying errors when copying data from one system to another, and improves productivity.

Further, maintaining the integrity of your system against data corruption, virus attacks and other security breaches is of the highest priority, given the plethora of cyber attacks organizations are experiencing.

Even the smallest breach could lead to lawsuits around peoples' personal data protection, hours of downtime, and costly fixes and upgrades.

While investing in a new ERP system or replacing the existing software with a better equipped, more modern version requires a substantial investment in energy, time and resources, if the right system is selected, it can save the organization time, money and headaches.

However, investing in ERP software should not be taken lightly. Moreover, choosing a system that suits your organization can be a daunting task largely due to the wide array of systems available on the market.

Criteria For Choosing an ERP System

Ultimately, choosing an ERP for your organization requires understanding what the organizational needs are and purchasing a system that will meet those needs without requiring the organization to completely re-engineer. Further, understanding the future needs of the organization (where the organization might expand for example) should play heavily into the purchasing decision. You may want to ensure that what you are purchasing is what you need for now, but can expand to meet the organization's future needs.

1. Cloud Storage

On-site servers and data centers are no longer the standard. This required purchasing a server – a sunk cost – but having to maintain it, which often means that an IT professional has to be either on staff or your organization has to maintain an agreement with an IT provider. This also means that any backups, security patches, hardware failures, and software failures are the responsibility of that IT provider. So while the original cost of the hardware is past, maintenance of the server can be very expensive.

Cloud-based systems have evolved over the past 20 years along with high-speed internet access, giving most users near-instantaneous access to the information they require. The cloud solution provides unlimited storage space, great processing speed and secure, authorized personnel access to your systems on demand from anywhere in the globe and from any internet-enabled device.

2. Process Automation

In many cases, productivity issues are related to belaboring teams with daunting, repetitive, and tedious processes that can be automated, at times reducing a multi-step process to a click of a button, and tasks that take days or weeks to complete may be reduced to a number of hours.

For instance, a school district might spend 2 weeks doing annual school reports (ASR's), involving hours of data collection, review, and report writing before submission might have that project reduced to 2-3 hours. Payroll runs are reduced from a couple of days to less than an hour with all of the appropriate tax filings and submissions and full compliance.

3. Software Integration

Modern ERP systems are designed to integrate with other systems – sometimes natively, meaning that the ERP might be designed to work specifically with a particular reporting software – or through an API (Application Programming Interface), which is an internal software that allows two programs to communicate. While the former option is often limited by the partnerships that the provider has, often the API reduces those limitations significantly.

The benefit to integration is that it supports automation tasks. For example, if you need to pull data from several different resources in order to run a report, instead of having to go to each system, run a report, perhaps in a spreadsheet, reformat the information and combine the data from each system, the API could be programmed to pull the data automatically to give you up to date information that can be used to run your reports.

Integration further reduces the need for double entry and decreases errors in keying in duplicate information such as misspelling a name, account number, address, etc., and formatting issues, such as the difference in date values or the ways numbers are treated.

4. Security and Access

Given the vast amount of data that is used by organizations, and the level of access granted by the cloud-based platform, it is critical to understand how a software handles both security and access. Modern systems incorporate features such as:

- 2FA (2-factor authentication), which means that someone cannot simply log into a system without a secondary authentication, such as an email or a text message, to verify that it is actually them logging into the system
- Access levels, which permit people with only certain authorization levels to create, view, edit, or delete information. For example, someone with an administrative level might be able to perform any activity that they want, but someone with a user level might not. Further, access might be granted based on location.
- Internet threat protection keeps attackers out of the system and prevents data breaches and implementation of viruses into the system. Because attackers' capabilities expand all of the time, this is done both proactively (to prevent certain types of attacks) and reactively (in response to attacks.)
- Ongoing software updates, as previously stated, help to keep attackers from finding and exploiting vulnerabilities in the system and will adapt to new security standards as they are being developed. This requires a developer that is attentive and committed to protecting your data.

- Offsite/remote backups and data restoration plans will ensure that if something happens, whether physical (a server or data center issue), software-related (a breach or virus attack) or malicious (a hostile entity changes or deletes data from the system) – the systems can be restored quickly. Redundant backups (backups of backups) and server mirroring (replication of everything on one server onto another) further protects data and ensures that data and the systems can be restored quickly.

5. User Experience

How users experience and interact with the system is referred to as UX/UI, or user experience and user interface. Both impact productivity and user fatigue. If information is difficult to find, not in logical positions or formats, or requires multiple steps – especially repeated steps - users tend not to get as much work done.

As part of the development process, a software developer should put great emphasis in understanding the users, how they will use the system and make certain tasks or steps intuitive, sometimes replicating features from other, unrelated, but familiar software. For example, many blog sites have a social-media style appearance, many software programs will have the "home" and "file" button at the top-left, the ribbon (where you can select different features and functions) at the top of the screen and icons are often used instead of or in place of text on them, as you can see in this screenshot from Microsoft Word.
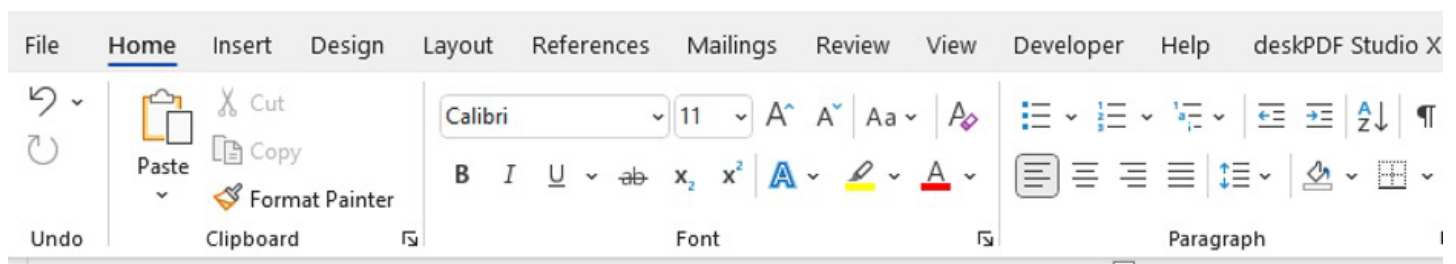
6. IT Support

There is very little value in purchasing or acquiring a software solution that doesn't have a strong support team behind it for many of the reasons mentioned above, including updates, security releases and patches, integrations, and improvements to the user experience.

However, simply getting the system set up, migrating your current data to the new system, providing training and support to answer questions, and making adjustments needs to be done as quickly as possible with as little interruption to operations as possible. When legislative requirements demand changes in processes, it is imperative to have a provider that can be proactive in making the necessary adjustments. Finally, getting a fast response or getting the right person on the phone is critical when something isn't working the way that it is expected.

The Bottom-line

Your ERP system is your organization's central operating system. Having a system in place simply isn't good enough. In order to both protect your organization and maintain productivity, while being prepared for change (which inevitably comes), planning for your ERP system upgrade should be a process that should not be delayed. Finding the right system requires more than simply finding some features that you think *might* work, but rather, committing to the process that will get your organization the best results.

About RDA

For more than 40 years, RDA Systems has specialized in building high-value ERP systems designed specifically to fit the needs of small school districts and municipalities. They are committed to providing their clients with the right software without unnecessary components and best-in-class support before, during and after implementation to enable their clients to fulfill their missions effectively.