

# ERP adds flexibility option for customers

Customers expect more in today's digital era, and the right ERP solution can help deliver it, writes **Jason Walsh**

Enterprise resource planning (ERP) solutions have moved into the cloud in recent years, but the real benefit is more than merely technological.

"I think it's very true that the move is toward the cloud. I think, though, that the move to the cloud is yesterday's news," said Gavin Peacock, group ceo of TRC Solutions.

The customer takes for granted that solutions like ERP can today be either on-premise or cloud-based, he said, just as they became accustomed to the move from text-based systems to Windows.

"We talked about Windows after the move from DOS, but after a few years, if you talked about Windows people would laugh. It was just expected," he said.

What selling points does TRC Solutions, which offers SAP Business One, focus on,

then? "Flexibility," said Peacock. "The benefit of ERP is putting all of your data and processes in one central place," he said.

This means that all of a business's resources can be put to work, both for the customer and the business itself, something that is crucial when making the decision to invest in an upgrade. TRC Solutions' customers want to use ERP to add value, he said.

"A lot of people have a renewed confidence when it comes to spending, and remember, the average ERP system is a ten-year relationship.

"We are so exposed to integrated business process technology today: you can renew your passport online, in a lot of countries you can do a lot of e-government things.

"We're seeing a big increase in self-serve and web-based portals, which are exposing their ERP systems to the cus-

tomers," he said.

Peacock said that this is all about empowerment.

"If you empower your customer you're changing everything," he said.

"E-commerce, even in non-traditional environments, is essential. At the end of the day, every business sells a product or a service.

"We're seeing a big movement toward the empowerment of mobile. People need to remember: all an ERP product is is a repository of data and business processes. In order to get a real return on that you need to invest in where users, be they staff or customers, will be.

"It's making paper more and more a thing of the past with mobile time tracking of time, automated invoicing, things like this.

"You get away from this ridiculous scenario with last century data input problems," he said.



Gavin Peacock, group ceo of TRC Solutions

Peacock said that SAP Business One is smart technology, but where TRC Solutions is going with it is very much in the direction of mobile empowerment and transaction

empowerment. "Things like time-sheets are now all done in real time on your mobile, which posts back into ERP. From a trans-

actional perspective you may have your trading history available to your customers. It's all ready for them to be self-served.

Peacock also said that ERP has a role in getting to grips with the EU's general data protection regulation (GDPR).

"You're [now] a data controller and after May 25 every business will have a new set of regulations governing them. For instance, every customer has the right to be forgotten. We do a GDPR interview with our clients, because ERP is, in our opinion, the only way small and medium businesses will achieve compliance.

Peacock said: "What do you do if one day ten people write to you?"

"As ERP moves all of your databases to one central repository, it allows you to take action."

Peacock stresses that getting ERP right doesn't just lower costs, it can also create new revenue streams.

"Whatever you sell, either a product or a service, you can make that available to your target audience," he said.

"It's a mobile economy we're in," he said.



Joe Kelly, ERP director at ProStrategy

## Planning with headroom for growth

Enterprise resource planning isn't just for multinational megacorps – it can bring real benefits to smaller enterprises

Enterprise resource planning (ERP) is a necessity in today's fast-moving digital marketplace, but it has long been considered the preserve of large companies. This perception, if it ever was accurate, is now out of date.

"I think when ERP started out it was a specialist area, really only suitable for big companies," said Joe Kelly, ERP director at ProStrategy.

The entire category of ERP software has matured since the early days, said Kelly. At the same time it has become more accessible – and affordable.

"It has become more affordable and really does what it says on the tin. This has made it much more accessible," he said.

ProStrategy works with Microsoft's key ERP product Dynamics, and has done since 2002. Today, Dynamics is available as a cloud product, either as pure software-as-a-service (SaaS) or on Microsoft's Azure cloud platform.

This aids flexibility, as Microsoft is committed to delivering the software, however customers intend to use it.

"It's still available as an on-premise solution, however," said Kelly.

"They'll continue making the software available for installation on customers' servers [and] at the moment that's still a fairly popular option, but people are increasingly looking to the cloud."

Kelly said that given ERP touches every part of a business, moving to the cloud is a natural move.

"Workforces are increasingly mobile, they may be working from home, on the road, or in other countries. Being able to access information is extremely important.

"The other thing is it's just less of a hassle. It takes care of DR [disaster recovery], it takes care of backups. That's all done automatically. Customers don't have to worry about the platform anymore, they just concentrate on the business solution," he said.

Kelly said that one of the

most important things to do with ERP is to think: time put into planning will save money down the road.

"The company needs to have its full operation reflected in the ERP. We push toward as much of an out of the box solution as possible, but it's inevitable that there has to be some customisation, as every company works differently."

Kelly said that ProStrategy helps develop and implement installations of Dynamics according to customer need.

"If you're doing something every day you become very good at it, and we work at implementing ERP solutions every day. If the organisation tries to do that on their own they'd have to learn the system and acquire skills. It's always better to bring in people who practise this every day," he said.

"The one thing I'd say is that every company we've been involved with has grown and changed as the marketplace has changed. You need to check your KPIs on a regular basis. You can't assume that they're still valid three years down the line and the marketplace does change," he said.

"We're at a stage that no matter what someone is doing, they can be connected into the ERP solution. Dynamics365, which includes CRM and ERP, can cover the entire business and people," he said.

Kelly expects Microsoft's Cortana artificial intelligence system to become more important in future too, but in the present the online is already everything.

"Instead of being just transaction based, it means that the system is coming back and making recommendations. It could look at sales trends and try to help you with forecasting.

"Microsoft uses a term called e-everything. Everything has become electronic. Increasingly, we live in a connected world and Microsoft allows you to work in that world, moving information back and forth between yourself and partner companies," he said.

### PROFILE: Microsoft Dynamics

# Connecting all the time

Mark Kane, Global Process and Enterprise Architect at Mainstream Renewable Power, discusses how Microsoft's ERP solutions has supported its business on a global and multi-market scale, and how the movement to the Cloud has improved working life

Mainstream Renewable Power is an independent global developer of renewable energy, with almost 10,000 megawatts in development and nearly 700 megawatts delivered into construction and commercial operation. Mainstream's core business is to develop, finance, construct and operate large-scale, renewable energy projects in emerging markets.

In operation since 2008, Mainstream has projects in South Africa, Chile, Ireland, Scotland, Ghana, Egypt and Senegal, and has recently established a joint venture in Vietnam.

When it came to implementing ERP in our business, Mainstream differed from a lot of other start-ups. From the beginning in 2008, we had a presence in multiple geographies around the globe, with a highly mobile workforce who needed to be connected at all times to our IT systems and to each other. We needed systems that would be intuitive and easy to adopt, and available 24/7. For our ERP solution, we needed strong multi-company, multi-currency (including currency triangulation) functionality, as well as exceptional consolidations and reporting functionality – this is where Microsoft stood out over other ERP services.

## Agile solutions for an agile business

When choosing our ERP solution, the key strengths that we identified with Microsoft ERP were the run-time flexibility of AX and the inter-operability of the Microsoft Suite in general. We knew that, as a start-up company, there would be forks in the road, changes of direction and ever-changing priorities. This meant the need for our IT systems to be as agile and responsive as the company itself is to new market opportunities. Our goal was to provide world-class IT that would be a business enabler and differentiator for Mainstream. Due to Microsoft's all-encompassing solutions for ERP, our senior management team adopted IT architectural principles of single supplier (with Microsoft as the software supplier), configuration-only (no customisations), and standardisation (standard laptop image, project and company templates). These architectural principles, particularly the approach eschewing customisations, meant that Mainstream's IT remained agile and responsive



Mark Kane, Global Process and Enterprise Architect at Mainstream Renewable Power

to change, and enabled us to be cloud-ready from the outset. For us, Microsoft enabled us to run our business end-to-end applications, while giving us the ability to plan our growth in a scalable and cohesive way and enable us to respond to the ever-evolving needs of our business. It gave our colleagues familiar tools and helped us optimise our operations with insights that we could action.

## Making things simpler with digital transformation

We began our initial roll-out program for Microsoft Dynamics, AX, and SharePoint in 2009. The following years saw us expanding these solutions and in 2014, we successfully began our move to the Cloud with Office 365 – including Dynamics CRM Online and Skype

for Business. This was hugely successful for us, with positive feedback across the business. Following this, we implemented our Azure wind data management platform, and our SharePoint Online solution with Information Rights Management.

In 2017, we are expanding our rollout of SharePoint Online and implementing Dynamics 365 for Finance and Service. Our annual IT survey, which goes to all colleagues, has demonstrated a large increase, year-on-year since 2014, of "satisfied/very satisfied" ratings with the IT service catalogue. It's no coincidence that 2014 was the year in which we commenced our cloud-adoption program, with a selling point for colleagues being that it's "the last upgrade you will need to do". With software as a service, your software updates with new features and functionality automatically as Microsoft releases them. Not only does this make life easier for our colleagues, but avoids downtime as nobody has to manually upgrade their devices.

## A system that understands finance

The next upgrade on our cloud journey is the implementation of Dynamics 365 for Finance, scheduled for January 2018. Our Finance function is a complex one, taking in multiple jurisdictions and now comprising a total of 113 companies, with complex internal and external reporting requirements. With eBECs, we found a partner that understood that a successful

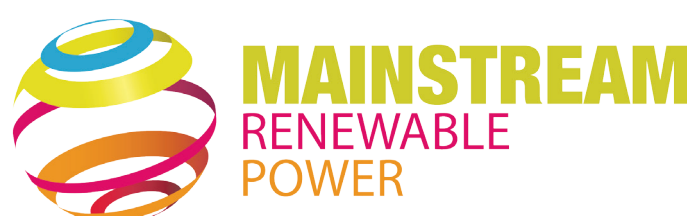


We needed systems that would be intuitive and easy to adopt, and available 24/7

ERP system requires much more than the transactional element and that the true business value of ERP is realised with the quality of the business intelligence that can be extracted from it.

Our strategic IT direction is focussed on "software-as-a-service" offerings and fully outsourcing the "nuts and bolts" of IT.

With strong supplier relationships in place, and our ISO-27001 and ISO-20000 certifications providing independent verification of the security and service levels of our IT solutions, our small internal IT team now focusses on business process improvements and opportunities which add value to Mainstream's business, instead of being distracted by fixing IT issues.



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