

A director's guide Evaluation, selection & implementation of accounting software

An information guide from Access



Stage one: the strategic decision

Even the smallest organisation now depends on accounting software packages to help them manage their business efficiently, and inevitably the time comes when the software that is relied on no longer measures up. It can take a while for the signs to be recognised.

Whether it is external market forces, business growth or lack of functionality that is driving the change, a strategic decision needs to be made about what to do next.

This is the time to sit down and really think hard about your business. Think about the future. What is your 5 year business plan? It is essential to be clear what your needs are now and what they will be in a few years time. You don't want to have to make another change a couple of years down the line.

Think about your competitors. Take a step back and view your business system from a competitive perspective. Which accounting software packages do your competitors use? Have they customised their choice of software to maximise the benefits for your industry?

Think about your current system's short falls. What areas are letting you down and what could be improved on? What effect would changing these have on your business?

Key questions

Below are some key questions to keep in mind during the selection and evaluation process:

- What are the main problems you have with your current accounting system?
- What is your budget and time scale?
- What do independent internet sites and articles in magazines suggest?
- What type of software will match the size and requirements of your business?
- What do you need now, and what will you need in three years time?

Stage two: selection process

This can be such a daunting task that some people shy away at this point and make the decision to stick with what they already have. However, once you have recognised the need for a change, it is important to follow this up. With careful planning and some helpful advice, selecting the right package for you and your business can be straightforward.

There are two key relationships to consider here: the relationship with the product itself, and the partnership with the software provider. Both can be fundamental to the success of your decision.

Now that you have identified any problems that need addressing, you can begin to look at what is available, keeping in mind the product and partner relationships at all times. Too much emphasis on the product and you will end up stranded when system problems arise.

Too much emphasis on the partner will leave you with a system that does nothing you need it to. Be sure to keep this balance in mind when reviewing your options.

Thorough research is essential. Make sure you become knowledgeable about what is on offer, what the downfalls of products are and how they compare to their peers – only then can you confidently make an informed decision about the right package for you.

Independent assessments are invaluable to get a true picture of performance.

Ask a consultant for tips and advice – they are more likely to have had experience of a variety of packages, and can offer professional recommendations. Online reviews can offer useful comparisons and unbiased opinion on the functionality and reliability of the products available.

Make sure that you plan now for future growth. Taking into account your projected requirements in one, three or five years time will save time and expense in the long-run.

Does the solution you are considering provide an easy upgrade path offering a step forward, or is it like a brand new installation? Does the software have the ability to grow with your business?

Once you have researched the options, you are able to make a shortlist of 3 or 4 providers whose product you feel will meet your needs. Contact them and request a demonstration of the product.

How the vendor reacts to this request is potentially very revealing about their company philosophy. A good sales manager will first analyse the needs of your company before even discussing potential product solutions. If they do not take the time to understand your needs, how can they hope to address them?

Good vendors will aim to understand the way your entire business works so that they can offer a solution structured around your core business processes.

By discovering your requirements (including those for documents and reports), the vendor will be able to properly address your strategic needs. Steer clear of any vendor that does not undertake a thorough needs analysis before offering a solution. Before the initial meeting, try and find out some background information on the track record of both the product and the vendor – including their innovation ability, awards or accreditations that have been won and any proof of their success. Going into the meeting with some background knowledge will give you a good base from which to assess their presentation.

Stage three: planning & implementation

Once you have decided on a product and a partner, you will need to work together to draft a project implementation plan. It is vital that you take into consideration the time and availability of your staff that will be involved in the implementation. Following this, an installation with test data will take place which will reveal any problems that may be encountered, allowing these to be sorted out before the live conversion.

At this point, the software providers will work with key accounts staff to train them in the use of the system, and any custom documentation or report writing that is needed will be undertaken.

Once the operators and users have been trained, the 'Go Live' date is set – avoiding year ends, audits and business peaks. Vendors should offer extended consultancy during the 'Go Live' period.

Once the implementation is complete and you have 'settled in' to the new system, a project review will ensure full acceptance of the software into your business.

This post-implementation review will check that the solution is continuing to meet your needs and will address any areas that still need some 'ironing out'. Supplementary training may be necessary at this time to ensure that you get the most out of your system.

Further information

Elite Business Services
 Elite House
 5 Sycamore Court
 Birmingham Road
 Allesley
 Coventry
 CV5 9AU
 T: 02476 601167
 E: info@elitebusinessservices.co.uk

Illustration of a typical implementation schedule

