

Integration made easy

Even the very smallest manufacturers can benefit from simple, low-cost IT integration, explains Guy Amoroso of 123 Insight

For any size of manufacturing business, IT integration is likely to pose a challenge. Yet, ironically, for Britain's smallest manufacturers, the challenge is disproportionately large, points out Guy Amoroso, managing director of ERP vendor 123 Insight, developer of the popular 'pay as you go' 123insight subscription-based ERP system.

Look at the facts, he urges. Some of 123 Insight's customers have just tens of employees, none of whom are IT specialists.

Moreover, when such manufacturers adopt an ERP system, it will likely be the first time that they have deployed an IT capability that is this extensive. And just as likely will be the fact that while ERP will be replacing some of the standalone specialist systems on which the business has hitherto relied, that replacement won't be wholesale; in other words, IT integration to other systems will be a definite requirement.

Simple and straightforward for customers

"The upshot of it all is that we have to make it simple and straightforward for our customers to achieve the level of IT integration that they want, while also making such integration affordable and economically viable," says Amoroso. "And very largely, we think that we've succeeded."

For proof, he points out, look no further than some of 123 Insight's customers.

Take Plymouth-based Vortok International, for instance, which manufactures a range of railway infrastructure maintenance and safety products. The business has just 29 employees, and before moving to 123 Insight's 'pay as you go' 123insight ERP software it had relied on a combination of a Pegasus Opera accounting system along with a series of fragmented Excel spreadsheets and Access databases spread across different departments.

Yet, despite its small size, Vortok has a projected sales turnover in 2014 of over £9 million, and holds both ISO9001 and ISO14001 quality accreditation.

As is more or less standard with 123 Insight customers, the starting point was six days of 'no-obligation' training, which users attend on the understanding that if they choose not to select 123insight they can walk away with nothing to pay.

What was surprising was the level of business benefit that the new system delivered. Putting in ERP, where previously ERP hadn't operated, saw lead times quickly plummet, output rise, and a dramatic reduction in inventory holdings, freeing up £200,000 in working capital in just two months.

And just as straightforward was the level of IT integration

delivered by 123insight, thanks to the product's easy-to-use Software Development Kit (SDK) option.

123insight was easily interfaced to the company's newly-upgraded Pegasus Opera accounts system, say Vortok's management, and also to Microsoft SharePoint for document management, ensuring that the correct revisions of drawings are associated with parts when creating purchase or works orders.

The SDK option is also used to drive 123insight's stores management functionality, allowing staff to use low-cost Android tablet computers to find, pick or check stock items. And in the future, say Vortok management, the company will use the SDK capability to integrate to their CAD and PDM systems, so that bills-of-material can be created automatically.

Vision of one core system

Sums up Chris Duffy, Vortok's operations improvement engineer: "From the start, we had a vision of having one core system, with which any other systems had to work. We wanted to keep SharePoint and have 123insight pass information to and from it and we've met that goal."

And Chichester-based C & J Marine, adds Amoroso, is another manufacturer finding value in 123 Insight's combination of low-cost, 'pay as you go' ERP software and low-cost, straightforward IT integration. Again commencing with 123 Insight's no-obligation six-day training course, the company began replacing a complex set of Excel spreadsheets and an internally-developed Access database with 123insight.

The expected benefits, even with just 12 employees licensed on the software, quickly came through: lead times reduced, errors came down, and inventory fell. But it has been the benefits accruing through IT integration that have surprised management, especially in terms of linking to a new e-commerce website used for customer orders. Links to Sage accounting, a third-party shopfloor data capture system, and a CRM system have all also delivered solid business benefits.

"IT integration needn't be complex," stresses Amoroso. "The beauty of the SDK option is that it allows customers to develop for themselves powerful and stable data transfer communications between 123insight and third party applications, safe in the knowledge that updates to any system relying on the SDK will not corrupt the 123insight SQL database."

Put another way, he adds, the ability for some of Britain's very smallest manufacturing companies to build low-cost IT integration links between their core manufacturing transaction backbone and whatever other systems they deploy is an undoubted game-changer.

"The price tag for IT integration used to be prohibitive, forcing manufacturers into complex and unreliable workarounds," he notes. "No longer: now they can access not only a solid ERP capability on an affordable, subscription basis, but also a solid, built-for-business IT integration capability as well." ■

Guy Amoroso: "we have to make IT integration affordable and economically viable"



Developing the right solutions

Low-cost, simple, and easy-to-buy ERP is something that small and medium-sized manufacturers desperately need, believes Guy Amoroso, managing director of ERP vendor 123 Insight.

Which is why, explains Amoroso, 123 Insight set about developing just such a solution, more than a decade ago.

"Our goal was to create an easy, pay-as-you-go subscription method of buying, implementing, using, and growing ERP right from the very start of the sales process," he states.

For instance, he explains, 123 Insight doesn't respond to manufacturers' requests for proposals in the same way as other vendors. Instead of filling in the details asked for in the proposal, the company simply invites interested manufacturers to a free two-and-a-half hour evaluation workshop.

If what they hear doesn't suit them, then they walk away. But if, as most find, it's precisely what they always wanted but didn't believe existed, they put their project teams on training courses at £3,000 per person for six days, or £500 per day.

But even at this stage, money doesn't change hands unless and until they move on to system implementation.

"When customers register to use the system, it's just a low monthly fee, without any binding contract," explains Amoroso. "And payments are only for licences actually in use. So during the early days of implementation that might only be a few."

And what about the price of the all-important SDK option that enables manufacturers to deliver IT integration? £100 per month all-up, Amoroso explains.

"Some manufacturers use it to link to their websites, but if they want to work with Apple or Android devices – for stock control purposes, for example – the SDK supports those, too. And if we come across something we haven't done before, we'll do that, too."



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