Choosing a Software Provider

Introduction

Analysts predict that the UK software industry will double in size by 2010 with leading research company, Ovum, stating that the market will be worth £6.44 billion by the end of this decade. The UK finance management systems market alone will be worth over £500 million by 2010 (Gartner Dataquest August 2006). With so much competition and seemingly fewer differentiating factors between software systems, how are UK businesses expected to choose one software supplier over another? It's hardly surprising when businesses are left confused and overwhelmed by the choices available to them.

This white paper is intended to help you as a UK business choose between one business software supplier and another. It highlights the key factors you should consider during the tendering process so that you decide upon the best choice of supplier for your business.

What you need to consider when selecting a software provider

The following key factors should be considered during the tendering process.

A product portfolio that supports the business as it grows

When selecting a software supplier, you need to consider the software needs of your business in five and even ten years' time. Today the organisation may require a basic enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, however tomorrow there could be a need for an ERP and a human resource (HR) system with integrated document management and business intelligence. Ultimately, thinking about the business' future plans can prevent the unenviable situation of having to deal with multiple software providers with distinct specialisms or having to revisit the tendering process in just a few years' time.

Accredited and award-winning software

You need to feel confident that your supplier's software products are fit for purpose and meet relevant industry standards. For instance, is the accounting software accredited by the Institute of Chartered Accountants for England and Wales? Does the

payroll software meet the requirements laid down by the HM Revenue and Customs? It's also worth asking whether the supplier and its software products have won any relevant industry awards and whether the supplier is a member of any UK industry bodies, such as the Business Application Software Developers Association (BASDA).

Financial stability

It's important to feel confident that the software supplier you choose can support you and your software system for years to come. Some software suppliers will carry an element of financial risk, especially during times of economic instability and so it's important to do your homework by asking to see evidence of the supplier's financial stability. With an insolvent/bankrupt software provider, your organisation's system will not be supported and you will experience difficulties modifying the software and correcting errors.

Local support

As a UK business, you need to feel supported by your software supplier on a local scale with UK-based offices and customer support centres. Local support helps to ensure quick response times. Even better is a software provider with a UK-based management team that understands the importance of fast decision-making. This ensures the company is able to respond quickly to regulatory and customer requirements. Having to wait indefinitely whilst customer requests are passed through a lengthy red tape process until finally approved or rejected by a director on the other side of the world, is a possibility when the software provider is neither UK-based nor UK-focused.

Sector-specific UK understanding

Software providers need to fully understand who they are selling to and their UK customers' particular needs. The supplier that doesn't fully understand its customers' needs can be likened to a fashion 'expert' who has been tasked with providing a client with a suit. The fashion expert takes the client's measurements and selects the trendiest and most fashionable lime green silk suit in his collection; however the client isn't happy because a lime green suit is totally inappropriate for a funeral! The fashion expert may well have provided the client with the best quality and most stylish suit available; however it turned out to be totally unsuitable for his needs.

In the same way, a software provider cannot expect its 'bells and whistles' finance system to be as suitable for a charity as a bank, for example. Factors such as industry regulation, key performance indicators and cost implications all impact the type of software system required.

The software provider needs to have invested time and effort understanding UK businesses across a range of sectors from charities and the NHS through to retail and financial services. Understanding the customer and their business needs should be the company's highest priorities as without understanding, the customer-supplier relationship is always going to prove a challenge.

Customer-centric approach

Similarly, each business decision needs to form part of a customer-centric strategy. For example, the supplier's product portfolio needs to respond to customer need and acquisitions should add value to the company's product set, ultimately benefiting the customer.

The company also needs to value the importance of remaining close to its customers throughout the customer lifecycle from the initial consultancy period through to after-sales support. For instance, customers should be involved in the product development process from providing input into the specification through to site testing prototype software.

Well-established customer base and reference sites

The supplier should be able to demonstrate a long track-record of providing successful implementations in your particular industry sector and should be willing to provide you with a comprehensive list of happy customers. Satisfied customers should be only too willing to act as reference sites and share their success stories so you can purchase in confidence.

Quality after-sales support

Your supplier needs to provide dedicated UK-based after-sales support so that your needs and any issues that arise can be responded to quickly.

You should also be provided with the facility to seek support via the telephone, email and the web. For instance, a 24 x 7 web interface featuring a knowledgebase of frequently asked questions and known fixes providing a 'self service' facility is provided by some suppliers. A facility such as this enables users to scan incidents prior to logging calls as well as allowing them to log enhancement requests.

Conclusion

Choosing a software supplier can often prove a long, drawn-out and confusing process. With a plethora of suppliers to choose from, it's difficult to know what really differentiates one software supplier from another. Each supplier's merits and shortcomings should be considered carefully so that the needs of the client's business can be best fulfilled.

When selecting a software supplier it's important to consider factors such as the needs of your business going forward, whether the software has been accredited and the financial stability of the software supplier. Importantly, the supplier needs to demonstrate closeness to your business in terms of geographical location and business understanding and prove an ongoing close working relationship with its customers.

About COA Solutions www.coasolutions.com

COA Solutions (formerly CedarOpenAccounts) is the UK's leading supplier of integrated business management and information systems to public, private and not-for-profit organisations in the service sector. COA Solutions prides itself on getting close to its customers by understanding their businesses and responding to their business needs.

COA Solutions' award-winning Smart Business Suite combines core financial management, procurement, human resource and payroll systems, integrated with a range of collaborative, document management and business intelligence solutions. These solutions extend the value and effectiveness of the finance, HR and payroll departments across the organisation and enable managers in the business to monitor, analyse and continually improve corporate performance.

COA Solutions has more than 500 experienced and professional staff supporting and servicing over 4,000 clients across the UK service sector including Companies House, Newcastle City Council, WHSmith, Royal Bank of Scotland, Aer Lingus, National Express Group, DFS, RSPB and Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust.

Closer to Your Business

COA Solutions follows a strategy of staying close to its customers by listening to, understanding and fulfilling their specific business needs. By sticking to this simple but effective strategy, COA Solutions ensures year-on-year customer satisfaction and one of the highest customer loyalty rates in the industry.

Customer retention remains high with 98% of customers putting COA Solutions' performance at average or better and 96% of COA customers stating that they will probably still be using COA Solutions products and service in 18 months' time (AMR International report for COA Solutions October 2007). Here's what COA Solutions' customers are saying…..

"After scouring the market, it soon became clear that COA Solutions is head and shoulders above the competition. Its OpenAccounts systems fulfilled all our requirements and the company fully understood our business needs."
Runwood Homes

"The COA Solutions team showed a real understanding of our requirements and the flexibility of the system to integrate with our core management processes was central to our choice."
Lambert Smith Hampton

"COA Solutions works closely with its customers to identify areas where enhancements are required. It's very encouraging to be able to contribute to the product development process."
London Development Agency

"COA Solutions consultants provided us with both technical and business expertise. They showed an excellent understanding of local authority requirements and how the solutions can be used to meet those requirements."
South Kesteven District Council

"The COA Solutions team has demonstrated a great understanding of eBuyer's requirements and has provided us with a highly-competitive solution."
eBuyer

"I've worked on a number of financial management software implementations and was impressed with the level of service that we received and the knowledge of the COA Solutions consultants. The relationship with COA Solutions doesn't just end once the implementation is complete. We are continually being fed information about changes outside of the technology, such as forthcoming regulatory changes, which is refreshing."
Cannons Group

"Here was a vendor that had clearly gone to a lot of trouble to understand our business and could demonstrate that its software would look and feel right for us without a lot of extra work."
Leonard Cheshire

Ten Reasons to Invest in COA Solutions

- Closer Location: UK-based and UK-focused with offices throughout the UK providing strong local support
- Closer Understanding: Strong knowledge and experience of a wide range of UK service industries
- Closer Relationship: Remains close to customers from consultancy through to after-sales support
- One stop shop for all business software - comprehensive portfolio of finance, HR, payroll, business intelligence and document management solutions that support the needs of a growing business.
- UK management team enables fast decision-making and response times
- Financial stability ensuring security of IT supply
- Accredited and award-winning software
- Well-established customer base
- Industry-specific customer reference sites
- Quality after-sales support

For further information about COA Solutions, call 01932 584000, email marketing@coasolutions.com or visit www.coasolutions.com