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**Introduction**

Few marriages are entered into with as much uncertainty, anxiety, and hope as the union between an ERP vendor and an ERP customer. There is uncertainty because, in most cases, the length of the relationship prior to marriage can be measured in hours. A few presentations, a lot of negotiations, too many lawyers who craft a prenuptial agreement, then off to the altar. There is anxiety because the risks are enormous for both sides. The seller is afraid of a poor implementation which will come back to haunt him in the market place, since the software is always placed at blame. The buyer is afraid that the software won’t perform as advertised and, if that happens, will he be left high and dry or will his vendor be there to make things right? There is ultimately hope, as there is in all marriages, that this is the right union of business partners to overcome any adversity, work in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect and, ultimately, achieve the project goals.

If the above sounds mildly dramatic, then good, it is dramatic. Software selection is the first critical decision you have to get right in order for your ERP project to succeed. If this decision is made correctly, then subsequent decisions become the determining factor in project success. If this decision is wrong, subsequent decisions are a moot point; the project is terminal, whether you recognize it or not.

**Start as you Mean to go On**

You should have in your hand, before the first requirements list is distributed, a list of the five to ten “hot button” issues that you have to see successfully demonstrated. Hot button issues are one of two types: (a) they are strategic advantages, which are not common, but cannot be abandoned, even if they don’t appear to immediately fit with ERP and (b) there is hands-on knowledge – from either IT or the business unit – that these issues are very difficult to solve programmatically, and very costly if done incorrectly. Your confidence in an ERP vendor’s ability to resolve this list to your satisfaction will often be the deciding factor in a close evaluation.

The software sales cycle is a time when you must be at your most ethical, your most professional, and your most careful. Remember that companies don’t sell very many of these packages, and your sale is often the difference between someone making quota for the year or not. Everybody will love you during the sales cycle and everybody will tell you only positive things during the sales cycle. Ignore the love, and ignore the positive spin, and try to figure out who has the best product for your organization, and will be a good partner for the future.

*The ERPFocus.com Editorial Team*
Almost no organization decides suddenly that ERP should be the next capital investment. Usually, an ERP project is a gradually escalating idea, beginning with a person or small group being given permission to explore and develop the idea sufficiently enough to be turned into a legitimate business discussion. Conducting a legitimate business discussion, requires forming some kind of defensible idea of how big ("big" simultaneously equals "cost" and "time") the project is and what the tangible benefits might be.

The size of the project, and the benefits of the project, result from a step known as “requirements gathering”. As the name implies, requirements gathering is the process of obtaining and writing down a detailed list of the activities that an ERP system must be capable of handling. This list is used as the fundamental basis to enter into discussion with ERP vendors about the capability of their product to satisfy your list of requirements. Later, if the project progresses far enough and a contractual agreement is made, fulfilling your list of needs can become a legal requirement.

The Devil is in the Detail

As you can imagine, the key to requirements gathering having value is getting down to gory details. For instance, if you list as a requirement, “Be able to take a customer order”, any vendor would be able to say their ERP product does that. “Be able to take a customer order in any unit of measure and in any currency” is a more detailed definition. “Be able to take a customer order in any unit of measure and in any currency over the internet” is an even finer description, and not every ERP vendor would likely be able to respond affirmatively to that requirement. Assuming you plan to do multiple modules – finance, planning, sales and distribution, purchasing, manufacturing – then the right level of detail will probably result in between five hundred and twenty five hundred written requirements.

Clearly, requirements gathering requires patience, an obsession for detail, and the business knowledge and communication skills to get people to articulate nuances about their job that they might take for granted. It is very possible that requirements gathering will be done by someone or some group other than the eventual ERP project manager or implementation team. Take a moment to think about a few processes that are outside the normal core operations, say freight accounting, legal entity structure, purchase requisition approval, asset management, sample delivery, and exporting. Would you know all the questions to ask? What the documentation problems were? Where legal boundaries exist? For this reason, it may be a very good investment to hire an ERP consultant with requirements gathering experience that can help tease out answers from these types of specialized knowledge areas.

Requirements gathering is a thankless task. If you can find people who do it well, nurture them and give them what they need. The payback will be enormous.
ERP Requirements Gathering (Part Two)

The ultimate success in requirements gathering is not only to capture everything that the current business process does today, but also to compile a list of realistic “should-be” changes. The term “realistic” is important, because if the should-be list is largely comprised of the wishful thinking of a few dreamers, then no vendor will touch it. But if you can capture changes which are reasonable, and would improve the process, then you can simultaneously ask, “And how much would that be worth to you, if we could do that?” From that point, financial benefits begin accruing, and you are starting to compile the data required for a justified ROI.

Quantifying the financial benefits from software has always been a dicey proposition. There is no accounting entry for “improved efficiency”, “better decisions”, or “greater understanding”. So if your requirement gatherers are good, they will coax along the thought process using those intangible phrases to try to get at things that are, in fact, tangible. “Where will improved efficiency show up? How can you recognize improved efficiency?” may lead to opportunities to identify job consolidations. (Side note: No rumor will insert more negative energy into an ERP investigation than the perception that ERP is going to “put a bunch of people out of work”. When it appears ERP would in fact be able to eliminate non value-added work, the discussion should be in terms of re-assigning people, not eliminating people. Every organization has turnover which requires backfilling jobs.) “What is the cost of bad decisions today?” may lead to some quantifiable discussion about inventory obsolescence costs, lost sales, or poor choices in product development.

Typically, the tangible benefits side of requirements gathering will result from reduced working capital and associated carrying cost, reduced manpower, reduced obsolescence cost, greater material and product yield, and service improvements leading to revenue increases. Expect some tension at this point, as requirements gatherers push for every possible benefit dollar, and the business unit pushes back on commitments they may be called upon to verify, and that they may live to regret.

Make Requirements Gathering your #1 Goal

Relative to its eventual importance, requirements gathering is the most under-appreciated yet tactically critical step in the process. The requirements list will serve as the basis for all vendor discussions, for the eventual contract language, and for the basis of your vendor relationship going forward. Get it right, and you have a common language for holding vendors accountable, for realistic product comparisons, and for guiding configuration decisions. Get it wrong, and you will spend inordinate amounts of time trying to unravel what was really meant by ambiguous requirements.

After you have been through the requirements gathering phase, you will pretty much know whether you have a compelling business case or not. If you do, it’s time to sell the case to your leadership and get project approval so you can begin talking with vendors in good faith.
Vendor Communications

Assume that your ERP project has been approved, and you have assembled a cross functional team charged with selecting ERP software. Let’s talk about how communications between vendors and your team should work. On your side of the fence, everybody on your team will have a different agenda, and the vendors will hear exactly as many different specs as you have team members. For their part, vendors are child-like in their attempts to get their way. If they cannot get you to agree to a point, they will happily go to another team member and get them to agree, and cite that as a team decision. For these two reasons, it is important to designate- early in the process - an individual who has sole authority to speak on behalf of the team and to make binding commitments. This doesn’t mean that you don’t have normal group interaction and communication; it just means that everybody understands that if the spokesperson didn’t say it, it isn’t official.

Spokesperson Delegation

Who the spokesperson should be is a matter of preference. Obviously it can be you, the project manager, as long as you protect against the risk of forming a personal relationship with a vendor during the sales cycle that influences your judgment. A good alternative is to select a purchasing professional to be the spokesperson. In addition to having experience in dealing with vendors, procurement people are already trained in keeping discussions ethical, transparent, and professional. And, as the software selection narrows, you have a negotiator already in place who understands the details. The risk with this arrangement, obviously, is that the purchasing professional must be able to absorb the team’s viewpoints, and your direction, and represent them fairly. The role is spokesperson; he or she has no more decision-making authority than you have delegated.

Having a spokesperson between you and the vendor provides some personal benefits besides communication clarity. The software search is a mentally exhausting process, and not being the lead spokesman allows you the luxury of not feeling like you need to remember every word and take notes on every conversation. Vendors will seek you out for a confidential sidebar conversation if they perceive a serious problem, so you maintain a better grasp on what the critical few problems are, rather than the trivial many. And just verbalizing instructions to the spokesperson helps you understand the issues and interactions better; this is complicated stuff, and it’s easy to think you understand it until you try to articulate it.

Regardless of how you choose to arrange your communication process, the important point is to make clear to everyone exactly what weight any bit of spoken or written word has in the total process. If you ever want to witness the Biblical phenomena of people talking in tongues, put a six person software search team in a room with a six person software sales team, and give them all equal authority to negotiate in good faith.
RFQ, RFI and RFP…
Mastering those Vendor Selection Acronyms

The abbreviations RFI (request for information), RFP (request for proposal), and RFQ (request for quote) represent documents that will serve as milestones when you are choosing an ERP vendor. Regardless of your ERP team structure, make certain that someone from procurement helps your team create effective RFI, RFP, and RFQ documents.

RFI

The purpose of an RFI is to provide relevant written information about an ERP vendor of interest. In essence, this is a business biography, which explains who the vendor is, and, if the RFI is well written, also conveys a sense of the company’s values, and what it stands for. You may have to read between the lines on an RFI, not only at what is said, but what is not said. Every ERP vendor wishes to put their best foot forward, without being misleading. As such, they are reluctant to simply say “no” to any of your questions. For instance, if your RFI asks “Are you ISO certified?”, you may get the straightforward answer of “Yes, we have been certified for six years,”, or a pretty strong answer of “We plan to be certified by September of this year”, or a weak answer of “A team has been assigned to prepare us for certification”. You may even get a lengthy explanation of what their alternative approach to ISO is, but it will be rare for anyone to simply answer the question “no”, even though it is a yes/no question.

RFP

After examining the RFIs from ERP vendors it should become apparent that there are a few front runners, who seem to speak your language and be aligned with your issues. These front runners will be further investigated, and pared down to a short list. The candidates for your ERP vendor short list move to the next phase of evaluation, and should receive an…

RFQ

From the RFPs, you will assemble a final list of two to five candidates. At that point, you will issue an RFQ – request for quote – in which each ERP vendor specifies all of the financial conditions to provide the proposed solution, including initial licensing costs, annual maintenance costs, payment terms, etc. Be courteous to your vendors; if you have no intention of selecting them under any circumstances, do not waste their time by asking them to prepare an RFQ for a complex ERP solution.

There will be an enormous amount of words said by many different people during the ERP software selection process. Having the written documentation acquired from RFIs, RFPs, and RFQs will be hugely beneficial to keeping the process fact driven as much as possible.
STEP 5

Shopping

Now that you’ve received official permission to purchase an ERP system, how do you go about paring down the list from two hundred plus ERP packages to something manageable?

The first good news is that it is improbable for all ERP packages to be equally applicable to your business and industry, so with a little bit – one to five days – of disciplined research, you should be able to cut the list by 90% (down to 15-25). This exercise drastically increases your knowledge of the software playing field while costing you nothing. If you have a dedicated team, ask each member of the team to complete this task individually, and then do a complete join on the lists.

Start with the internet. Use search keywords like “ERP software”, “ERP database”, “ERP software search engine”. In many cases, you will be asked for personal and company information, and you may be uncomfortable letting the world know you might be in the market for software, but you have to start somewhere. You can also search “ERP” and your industry.

Next, know what your competitors are running. This is for two reasons: (1) It’s a pretty good check on whether or not your pared-down list is valid (their software should be on it) and (2) you will be asked this question when you make the final recommendation for software to the executive committee.

Third, read printed material. A large amount of written information comes from the internet, but also think about trade magazines, newsletters, or tradeshow brochures that people might have.

Lastly, network. Talk to people you have met at training classes, or conventions. Talk to your IT people; they probably already know who the best software vendors for your organization are. Talk to people you used to work with. These conversations are important, because you begin receiving two messages simultaneously – the word content of the message, which is the same as the printed word, and the tone of voice, which can range from reinforcing to contradicting the word content.

Managing the Unmanageable

When you have assembled a list of fifteen to twenty-five companies of interest, build out an RFI (request for information). This is a formatted document that you send to each company, to acquire basic background and contact information. If you construct your RFI well, you will likely cut your list in half just based on the responses to the RFI. (For instance, if a mid-size player responds that they have no implementations in your industry, or if a company is late in returning an RFI, is there a compelling reason to continue investigating them?).

After evaluating the results of the RFI, you should be able to narrow down your interest to a list of eight to twelve viable candidates. Now it is time to roll up your sleeves, for the hard work is beginning.
Creating the Vendor Short List

You’ve done your research, and you now have a list of eight to twelve viable ERP providers. Your next step is to cut that list again, to create a short list of four to six candidates with whom you are going to engage in serious discussions. Begin this process with no preconceptions. Each competitor starts with an equal opportunity.

If you fit a statistical norm, your semi-finals list breaks down kind of like this:

1. You have one to three vendors who are small- to mid-size vendors with an industry-friendly solution, and they seem to understand your business and its problems. They don’t have huge development staffs – nor do they have huge price tags and huge maintenance fees. These vendors are widely used by your competitors.

2. You have one to three large vendors, who have limited experience with your business, or a similar business model. While you wouldn’t describe the fit as “perfect”, you have confidence that these vendors will be around for the long term, and that development will keep pace with changing business requirements. These systems are more expensive to buy and maintain.

3. You have one vendor who doesn’t have experience with your industry, but promises rapid and specific customization to make a generic blueprint specific to your business.

4. You have one large vendor who has no experience with your industry, but has let it be known that they are desperate to partner with you so that they can break into your industry. As such, they will be more than normally accommodating, in terms of price, maintenance, and service.

You may have other characterizations, but at this point, the competition is less about the software per se than it is about the relative trade-offs between purchase economics, the viability and experience of the vendor, and how important you perceive you might be as a customer. These are fundamental strategic choices, and you do not need to understand anything about software to assess these risks. You need general confidence that the software will work – but the specifics can come later.

There is no mathematical formulation to tell you how to weigh and assess each vendor’s pros and cons. When you have a proposed short list in hand, discuss it with your IT director, and maybe your requirements gathering consultant if you engaged one – not for approval, but for a reasonableness check. You are basically looking for any logical flaw by which your vetting process may have resulted in eliminating a vendor with an ideal ERP solution for you.

When you are comfortable that you have the strongest group of ERP provider candidates, it is time to send out the RFPs.
Evaluating the Vendor Short List

Once you have the short list assembled, pressure escalates rapidly. The ERP community suddenly gets very small and gossipy during the sales cycle.

The actual process is pretty thorough, and pretty exhausting, so go into it as well rested and mentally balanced as you can. After you have the short list, you should contact each sales rep and let them know they will be receiving an RFP (request for proposal) which is to be based on a requirements list (from your requirements gathering study). As with the RFI, get professional help to assemble the RFP, because the ultimate value will be in having written documentation that details each different vendor’s value proposition.

There will be at least two separate sets of long meetings with each vendor. The first is for the vendors to question you, making certain they understand fully your requirements list, your hot button list, your business model, whatever strategic advantages today’s software has, and trying to uncover any critical criteria not covered by the RFP/requirements list.

The second set of meetings is for the vendors to present their proposal, and for you to question it. This is really the most critical step in the whole process, because it is during this step that you develop all of the intangible feelings about how well or poorly the software – and vendor partnership – would fit.

This is a tricky step, because vendors are going to give a presentation –mostly in the form of software demos- that highlight all of their advantages, and hide or downplay all of their weaknesses. You do not want to start the process by being cynical or distrustful, but you do have an obligation to your organization to probe beyond the surface discussion. “Trust but verify” is applicable to ERP decisions as well as foreign policy. A good verification technique, if a vendor knows he has a legitimate shot at the business, is to have him set you up with reference calls to existing customers. This gives you a chance to discuss - in private – the software with a business peer who is using it. Even here, though, remember that the vendor will arrange a reference with a satisfied customer, and it will be up to you to probe.

Leave No Stone Unturned

It is not unusual to find that after the RFP response meeting, when you and your team regroup and begin talking, big areas of different understanding, and gaps in understanding emerge. If that is the case, do not hesitate to schedule yet a third meeting with the sales team, specifically to discuss these disconnect points. Ultimately, schedule as many vendor meetings as it takes – you cannot afford to get this decision wrong and they cannot afford not to answer your questions.

After a point, though, there are no more questions, no more meetings; it’s time to ask for price quotes.
The RFQ

You’ve talked to the vendors ad nauseam; you’ve read and re-read and clarified the RFPs; you’ve done every reference call and site visit allowed; it’s time to start talking price. You offer each vendor who you believe could provide you with a viable software solution an RFQ (request for quote). This is the process by which the vendor formally tenders a price for the requirements they intend to fulfill.

Be prepared to be initially confused by the RFQ results. Most software vendors do not put effort into simplifying their pricing, and this is complicated stuff. You will likely have to study the RFQ carefully to fully understand it.

Is your vendor selling a single software package for a single price, or is he selling you multiple modules comprising a total package (cafeteria style)? If your vendor is pricing for multiple modules, is he charging you a flat fee per module, or charging you per license? If not per license, is he charging you on some other basis, like purchase orders generated, invoices created, etc.? What if you purchase an additional module two years from now? How is annual maintenance structured? What is it based on? Are there multiple levels of maintenance service offered in the RFQ?

After you have studied the RFQ, and think you understand it, imagine purchasing a company approximately half the size as your own, and standardizing them on your ERP package. If you understand fully what your immediate out-of-pocket expense and annual increase in maintenance would be as a result, then you probably do understand the RFQ pretty well. If not, study it some more.

What Should you Look For?

The RFQ should detail (a) the initial expense to acquire and load the appropriate software modules and (b) the annual cost of maintenance. These two figures, cumulated over a fixed time period represent the total cost of ownership. The total cost of ownership is the bottom line number to use when comparing relative economics.

The key question about calculating total cost of ownership is how long to amortize your ERP system. Imagine that you have two vendors with approximately equal software solutions. One vendor charges a high amount up front for the software, but has relatively low annual maintenance. The other has very low software selling price, but charges dearly for maintenance. In that case, the cumulative total cost of ownership will intersect at some time in the future. The life expectancy of the software that you use to calculate payback could determine which has the apparent economic advantage.

In the end, these are numbers, and you should be very much in command of them. It will be one of the few tangible factors in decision-making. Considering economics in ERP requires a careful balance; while you want to be a responsible steward of the company’s money, there is no amount of savings that can make up for a poor software solution. Consider economics carefully, but do not depend upon them exclusively for your decision.
Step Nine: The Decision

After all of the homework, preparation, and research, it is time to make a software decision. If you are lucky, one package is so clearly superior to the rest that the decision is obvious, and any rational person would agree on it as the logical choice. However, if there are two or more close contenders, then you need to choose, and – equally important – be able to defend your choice.

Your decision will be based on three distinct factors. The first is your perception of the effectiveness of the software; the second is the economics of the purchase, and the third is your perception of the business relationship with the vendor. You may think that the last should be a moot point if the software works well, and the economics are satisfactory, but it is still important. There is a huge difference between “works well” and “work perfectly” and how effectively you bridge the gap between those two conditions is largely dependent on the relationship you have with your software vendor. Ultimately, you will judge your vendors on three questions: 1. Will this vendor really listen to my concerns? 2. Will this vendor act on my concerns? 3. Am I important to this vendor?

Finding an Evaluation Logic

How well the software works can be very tricky, especially if different modules have different relative advantages. The most important piece of advice in this article is this: If the choice between two software packages is reasonably close, establish an objective written evaluation to justify your ultimate decision. This evaluation requires hard thought and leadership on your part, because it has to be seen as both impartial and measuring the right things. The evaluation could be a list of questions, with a point awarded for each “yes” answer. Alternatively, it could be a weighted scorecard, listing each module, its relative importance to the future health of the company, and its perceived effectiveness. This should align the best software with the company’s strategic direction. A weighted scorecard also allows for non-transactional considerations to be part of the evaluation: for instance, how difficult are upgrades? If you feel like your objective evaluation provides you with a drastically wrong conclusion, then recheck your evaluation logic. If the logic is sound, then the software solution may be counter intuitive. As project leader, it is your responsibility to figure out which, and correct any problems. You will be expected to articulate clearly to your company leadership why you made the decision you did.

The closer performance evaluations turn out to be, the more important the role of economics become in the decision. Conversely, if a software package is undeniably advantaged, as long as the economics are reasonable, you should select the advantaged software. Close performance evaluations actually give you a stronger negotiating position, because you are willing to go either way.

So make your decision, and good luck. Remember, performance first, economics second, and vendor relationship third. But consider all three.
Step Ten: The Contract

The contract you sign with your software provider depends, to a large part, on how risk averse they are, and how risk averse you are. In addition to specifying what is being purchased, the contract will also try to specify everyone’s responsibility in the event there are problems with the implementation. Because of this, your purchasing contract could be dozens of pages long.

Get help interpreting the contract. If your legal department does not have specific experience in software contracts, it is a good investment to hire a legal specialist to review and advise on your contract. The contract you initially receive is going to be heavily slanted toward protecting the vendor’s interest. They will list special failure circumstances for which they wish to be contractually specified to be free from liability. They may seem odd when you read them; what you start to realize is that this is a list of all the litigations which have gone against an ERP vendor. They’ll say that if their software crashes your hardware, it isn’t their responsibility; they’ll say that if someone gets past your firewall and puts a virus in their software it isn’t their responsibility; they’ll say that if you mislead them on the requirements and something they didn’t know about doesn’t work, it isn’t their responsibility. The proper response for you, and your legal counsel, is to sort out the issues in which there could be shared culpability, and clarify responsibilities. In order to do this well, you have to spend a lot of time assuming things go wrong; very little of a contract is applicable to a project which goes well.

The contract will also specify the financial arrangements, and how financial arrangements are verified. For instance, if the sales module is based on number of users, how will the vendor verify the number of people using the system? What happens if they find a discrepancy? Also included will be all of the agreements around the maintenance contract. On what number is the annual percentage based? Can the annual percentage change? If so, how often, and how much? These financial process decisions should be spelled out in the contract.

Protection your Interests

And lastly, there will probably be a handful of addendum pages specific to your negotiation and your contract. Perhaps you achieved a special discount on certain module combinations, or you wanted a contractual guarantee on a future option. These things would appear as addendums to the main contract.

Obviously, you hope that after the initial signing, you never have to refer to the contract again – a likely occurrence if the implementation goes smoothly. However, as stated earlier, you have an obligation to your organization to protect its interest – as best you can – in the event you have been mislead, or the product’s performance has been misrepresented. The only way you can do that is to ensure that the contract you sign is fair and reasonable. And remember – get experienced legal help.
Conclusion

If you are very fortunate, there is an ERP provider for your business out there whose product is widely recognized as the best in your industry, and all you really have to do is negotiate the fairest economic deal possible. If you are less lucky, no ERP vendor will provide a solution that is perfect for you, and you will end up choosing between two or three “close but not quite” solutions based on the product weaknesses that will do you the least harm.

If you are in the latter situation, you are in a reasonably high-risk situation. You are really basing your conclusions on product demos, using canned data and easy examples. All of your requests to see the software handle hot button issues effectively are met by, “that would require so much set up time, we might not be ready for weeks” or “we would have to do some modifications – which we are only willing to do if you have signed the sales contract”. As a result, what you truly know is how well your vendors do at giving canned presentations.

It isn’t all doom-and-gloom, however; vendors have a vested interest in making you successful. Their worst nightmare is to sell you a product and be named as the defendant in a civil suit a year later. In the midst of everything else that you are considering, have a theory about which vendor has the most to lose in the event the implementation goes south.

The largest risk for misjudgment on your part is in believing a sales rep that confirms an important software capability even though he can neither demonstrate it or provide written documentation on how it works. This isn’t because ERP sales reps are bad or unethical; it is a result of reps being proud of the products they represent and being unable to conceive that somebody has a valid business need that their product cannot handle. They may not be certain how, but they are certain that it can. From that standpoint, put a lot of weight in how well a sales rep knows the details of the product. Have they actually used it in a business setting, or is their job mostly taking clients out for dinner? Can they go beyond the standard canned answer to a question, and adequately handle a follow up, and a follow up on the follow up?

The process described is long and gradual. You may choose to use all of it, some of it, or none of it. Every sales cycle is very unique, and all sales cycles are essentially the same. Trust your business instincts, and trust the opinions of people around you who have a proven track record at making sound business decisions. If you are conscientious, listen well, and don’t mind thinking hard, the odds are in your favor to make a good decision.
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