

The SMB solution selection challenge

It's all too easy to get caught out

Dale Vile, June 2021

Selecting software or cloud services for a small or medium business is a potential minefield.

Even if you review a range of options and pick a solution that seems to have everything you need, you can easily find that you don't get what you expected when you try it in the real world.

The first pitfall is taking feature and function lists on product and sign-up pages at face value. For marketing purposes, IT companies sometimes provide just enough capability to tick a box, but not enough for a feature to be genuinely useful in the real world.

Another potential problem is hidden complexity. Things you would imagine to be very straightforward to set up and use turn out to be difficult, confusing and/or convoluted when you try them in practice.

Older solutions, which have been extended over the years as the vendor has acquired other companies or combined different product lines, are prone to this. Under the covers, even some big-brand solutions are driven by a hodgepodge of different architectures, data structures, policy engines and even user interfaces stitched together Frankenstein-style.

A practical tip here, as we mentioned in our paper 'The Application Complexity Monster', is to look at how the admin console of the solution you are considering is structured. If the menu system is complex, fragmented and inconsistent, and provisioning a new user means going into multiple different areas, that's one indication that you have Frankenstein's monster on your hands.

Of course, another reason for complexity is simply that the solution was originally designed to serve customers with genuinely complex needs. It's not uncommon, for example, for enterprise-level applications to be repackaged or reworked for smaller businesses.

This isn't always a bad thing as it can give your organisation room to grow, but it depends how thoughtfully it has been done. The danger here comes from 'big iron' applications pushed down-market with little consideration for how needs, technical expertise and resource availability vary between smaller and larger customers.



Related to this, a practical challenge you are likely to have as a smaller business is that you can't just pull a team together for a few weeks or months to conduct an in-depth evaluation of a potential solution, as a large enterprise typically would.

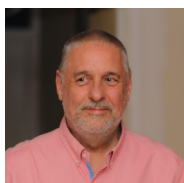
So how, from a practical perspective, can you protect yourself from selecting an application based on a high-level assessment and good faith, only to discover that it falls short as you get into using it?

Coming back to the theme of this post, you need to assess the vendor's commitment to companies like yours. Search online for real-world experiences from existing customers of a similar size and type to you. If the company has a user forum, take a look at which feature requests have been actioned or ignored. Are the everyday needs and frustrations of smaller customers being taken seriously?

Some of this may seem pretty obvious but in my experience of working with smaller businesses, decisions are too often made based on brand prominence, first impressions, and an assumption that the supplier wouldn't be in business if their solution wasn't fit for purpose.

The real question though is 'Fit for whom?' And the only way to establish this is to do your research properly.

About the author - Dale Vile



Dale is a co-founder of Freeform Dynamics, and today runs the company. As part of this, he oversees the organisation's industry coverage and research agenda, which tracks technology trends and developments, along with IT-related buying behaviour among mainstream enterprises, SMBs and public sector organisations.

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