



Facility Safety Management ®  
September 2008

## Exploring EHS Software Solutions

BY MARK ODIAN

**When making a large strategic** investment in any information management software package, it is

important to consider the big picture.

While it may be just your department that has an immediate need for data management software, an enterprise-wide solution that spans multiple divisions, departments and other groups will uncover cost saving trends through data mining and analyses.

If you have to start small, one of the most important things to look for in an EHS software system is its ability to expand into areas that other departments and facilities can make use of. As you show the viability of integrated software, other departments will quickly add on to your system.

Some simple factors to be taken into consideration before making a decision include:

- Is the solution modular? Does it have the modules you want now, and can it easily and cost effectively expand into other areas of EH&S? Since every organization is different, there are no solutions that will meet your needs perfectly so an adaptable solution is desirable.
- Can the software mimic your unique organizational structure so that the data stored is meaningful? This is very important if you want to generate meaningful trends.
- Does it have built in report writers (both for ad-hoc queries and more advanced queries)? Can you do your own custom data mining and trend analyses?
- Scalability: Will the solution support your group of users as well as the entire corporate environment once you expand out?
- Vendor longevity: How long have they been doing EHS software? Look for a company that has been around for the long haul;
- Hosting: Do they have an installed solution and a hosted solution?

- Ownership: If using a hosted solution, who owns the data (very important)? Do you have the right to copy your entire database down to your servers at anytime? Do you own your own data? Do you have access to the hosted server it is stored on?
- If you store your data in-house on your own network servers, find out if the solution is database independent?
- Is the user interface customizable and user friendly?
- Web, windows, or both: Will it run as a windows app or a web app? This is important so that your end users have the flexibility to use the application wherever they are;
- Point and Click Configuration/Customization: Because no application completely meets your needs out of the box, it is important that the software be flexible and adaptable to your requirements; And of course the best solution is one where you don't have to go back to the vendor for costly changes. Look for a point and click form editor that you can use to make changes to forms yourself.
- Define occupational health coverage: Review a vendor's modular solution. Make sure they have the modules you need now and look to the future to see that they can cover, right now, what you will need down the road. Otherwise you will be stuck with a system that won't work for you;
- Make sure they have the modules you need now and look to the future to see that they can cover, right now, what you will need down the road. Otherwise you will be stuck with a system that won't work for you.
- International language form translation: Do you need your forms translated in multiple languages for your employees. Very few vendors offer this service. Some offer instant form translations. But don't think of a language as just foreign. Some vendors allow you to come up with a set of terms that your organization uses uniquely and translate a form from its default terms to your terms. This is in essence a language translation too. Look into this feature;
- International unit measure of conversion: Can the software easily convert various units of measure?
- Maintenance and support promotions: Very often a vendor will have promotions running. Check into what's available; Look for free support for a period of time.
- How much is support and maintenance? The going rate for maintenance and support seems to be an annual payment of around 15-22 percent of the license fee. This varies. Look at not only annual cost but what kind of support they offer; Who do you speak with? How long will you wait? And check with vendors refs to see how they like support.
- Mobile Questionnaires and PDA use available? Surveys, audits and questionnaires are a big part of EHS. How often would it be helpful to have this functionality mobile? See if the vendor has a mechanism to take questionnaires out into the field with a PDA application;
- Ad-hoc and advanced reporting capabilities built in: The software should have many reporting tools built into the system including a quick ad-hoc report builder; This should allow users to quickly draw from fields on various forms to put together a report which can be run on demand. Additionally there should be some kind of advanced reporting tool as well that allows sophisticated programming.

- Support for commercial reporting tools: If your company uses a commercial reporting tool, you want to make sure you have complete access to your data in the database. Ask the vendor if you have direct access to upload and download data directly to the database. And is the database documented so that you can access it with little trouble?

### **Cost Benefit Analysis and ROI**

When trying to determine the ultimate return on investment, you are forced to ask the classic question, "What is the cost of an accident that never happens?" This question has plagued risk managers and EH&S professionals for decades. Since the advent of comprehensive EH&S software, the subject has gained considerable interest.

Using data stored in an EH&S software application over a number of years, reports on cost and savings data can be generated based on numerous variables which may ultimately provide increased ROI.

The number of organizations that initially decide to take a piecemeal approach is staggering. It is not always the purchasers fault. Many times management does not understand that purchasing a comprehensive EH&S software package now (even though they may not use all its components) will save tremendously in the future.

Mark Odian is Director of Marketing and Sales for Knorr Associates Inc., a provider of EHS software solutions since 1979. For more information, go to [www.knorrassociates.com](http://www.knorrassociates.com).