

The Software Selection PARADOX

by Jill Gilbert

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In following the environment, health, and safety (EH&S) software industry, I keep my eyes open for new and emerging products. Recently, I came across a software company that I had not heard of before. Their Web site claims that [Company X] “is a market leader in enterprisewide [EH&S, governance risk and compliance, etc.] solutions” and that they offer a “comprehensive suite of applications.” But what does a vendor mean when they say that they offer an EH&S software package—greenhouse gas emission reductions? Broad and deep multimedia environmental software appropriate for global operations? ISO 14001 environmental management systems software?

An organization looking for EH&S software has a multitude of choices, too many in fact.

There are approximately 5000 EH&S software products on the market, ranging from focused “point” solutions to mid-market software to comprehensive, enterprise-capable software systems that can support global operations. When selecting EH&S software, where do you start? How do you know what to believe? What is marketing hype, and what is real?

The paradox of choice says that the more options available to an individual, the harder it becomes to make a selection. More choices don’t make the selection process easier, but having no choices takes away some of the freedom they believe they have. You might think that, given a list of choices, you would choose the one most important to you. In reality, humans choose the one that is easiest for them to understand and evaluate. Very often we do so because we don’t have the time to put in the research necessary to make an informed decision.¹

When selecting software, should you consider only the market leaders, or only those applications that everyone else uses? The answer may surprise you...

A Balanced Approach

“Software selection made simple” is unrealistic. However, organizations can still strive to achieve balance in several areas to make the software selection process easier.

Software evaluation and selection process. Do not shortchange the software evaluation and selection process, but do not go to extremes in your evaluation. Follow a thoughtful, rational process and document your decisions. Understand your business, and make sure

► Why Do Companies Choose What They Do?

Organizations have different subjective and objective motivations for software selection. Below are several case studies from my experience. One company did not want to use what everyone else uses, perhaps because of implementation, maintenance, and user adoption challenges associated with the leading products, or perhaps they want a competitive edge. They selected an emerging enterprise EH&S software package.

A second company evaluated a handful of potential solutions, from the EH&S modules of a large enterprise resource planning (ERP) software company to a focused EH&S compliance-driven application to an enterprise EH&S application to an industry-focused EH&S package. They selected the EH&S software package developed specifically for their industry.

A third company polled its competitors in their industry sector. They evaluated several of the EH&S market leaders, also considering an emerging software package and the possibility of developing software in-house. They selected an emerging enterprise EH&S software package.

A fourth company evaluated 75 or more software solutions—an academic approach that must have consumed significant time and effort—and selected a leading enterprise EH&S software package.

A fifth company evaluated the environmental modules of a large ERP solution and found the capabilities too narrow to meet current and future needs. They recently initiated a broader evaluation and selection process.

that you accurately identify your business needs before starting software evaluation and selection (see “Good Requirements Lead to Better Software,” *EM* August 2009, page 32).

EH&S needs and strategic direction. Ensure that your EH&S business needs align with your organization’s overall business strategy to help guide the software selection process. Find software that meets near-term, mid-range and long-term needs.

Resource needs. Any software initiative requires a mix of people with the right expertise, plus time and money. Make sure that your organization is prepared to apply the appropriate level of resources required to implement and maintain the selected solution. Too many or too few resources will impede the implementation.

Selection criteria. Make sure that you have an objective set of software evaluation and selection criteria that examine many areas beyond license fees. If your organization is evaluating software and the final selection gets down to license fees, then the organization probably is not mature enough for an enterprise EH&S software solution.

Facilitator. Find an independent, objective party to facilitate the process. The facilitator can guide you through the process and serve as a “voice of reason.”

Final Thoughts

There is an abundance of software packages available in the market, and several approaches to software selection. Different solutions are appropriate for different organizations, depending upon the business needs the software must meet, the organization’s priorities, their information technology (IT) needs, their IT maturity, and their culture. Expand your horizons beyond the “big three” software vendors and do not feel compelled to pick the same software your competitors use. Whatever you select, perform due diligence before signing a contract (See “EH&S Software Due Diligence Is Critical to Success,” *EM* December 2011, page 20).

Take the time to do it right, but do not take forever. If you need help understanding the difference between marketing hype and software capabilities, then engage the assistance of a competent professional. You might find the right person within your organization, or you can look to a third party. **em**

“People choose not on the basis of what’s most important, but on what’s easiest to evaluate.”

» Barry Schwartz,
*The Paradox of Choice:
Why More Is Less,*
Ecco 2003

Reference

1. Scrivens, P. “Easier Is Better than Better,” *Smashing Magazine*, November 28, 2011.