

The dos and don'ts of asset management IT investment

What makes the difference between success and failure when investing in an IT system for intermodal asset management? A new report from Real Asset Management plc offers a step-by-step guide to the process, from initial evaluation of software needs through to final systems implementation

Drawing on lessons learnt from multiple projects with small, medium and large companies, software specialist Real Asset Management plc (RAM) has recently published The Intermodal Management Evaluation Guide to provide best practice guidelines for any company considering investment in new or upgraded intermodal asset management systems. "The aim of this guide is to save companies valuable time when it comes to planning and evaluating a new intermodal IT system," explains Craig Anthony, RAM's General Manager. "Hopefully, it will be referred to throughout the process to help avoid costly mistakes."

The Guide covers the entire software research and implementation process, from initial identification of a company's specific IT needs, through to setting up a project team, planning project timelines, selecting and working effectively with software vendors, managing the actual implementation and beyond.

Getting off to the right start is critical to the final success of the project. The Guide recommends that companies give themselves enough time at the outset for a 360 deg review of existing systems, pinpointing their strengths and weaknesses in the light of current – and forecast – business requirements.

Based on this, companies are then advised to create a 'wish list' of features for a new system. The Guide provides checklists of some of the most common issues triggering the software investment decision, whether companies have no systems in place, are looking to upgrade from spreadsheets, have legacy system issues or have outgrown their current off-the-shelf package.

There are multiple stages involved in researching and implementing an intermodal asset management system. Managing all of this can be a very complex affair and there are plenty of opportunities for projects to head south in terms of timescale, cost and/or eventual outcome. The Guide lists a number of key actions to pre-empt the most common problems, including:

- Set strategic goals and identify very clearly what your organisation wants to achieve upon implementation.
- Select a project co-ordinator who will be available to manage the whole project from start to end and is able to confirm that the new system fits the needs of your organisation.
- Talk to end-users to ensure that you know what they really want, instead of simply replicating procedures that have become established over time but may no longer meet genuine customer needs.
- Identify timescales so that the project proceeds in a timely manner

- the Guide provides a basic timeline for reference.

After the initial planning process, projects should move into a phase of gathering background information. Here, the goal should be to collect as much information as possible on each of the systems under consideration, including a rough initial quote from each potential supplier so that no further time is wasted evaluating systems that do not fit the budget.



Craig Anthony: saving valuable time when it comes to planning and evaluating a new intermodal IT system

During the information gathering process, the RAM Guide recommends that companies assess the level of customer service they receive, as a valuable indicator of how good the service is likely to be if they become a customer.

With background information in hand, the project should move onto in-depth analysis of potential systems and suppliers, including the following actions:

- Conduct a detailed literature review – ask questions if something does not look right.
- Arrange for software demonstrations, either via the web or in person.
- Check the viability of your potential supplier. How long have they been in the industry? Are they specialists? What is their track record and reputation?
- Obtain client references - people who will be willing to speak with you about their experience.
- Verify the type of technical support on offer during and after implementation.
- Secure details of recent and ongoing software developments and confirm how you will benefit.
- Ask the supplier to provide you with a gap analysis to identify the gaps between the standard functionality of their software and your requirements. Ensure that you get

costs and timescales for any bespoke items identified during the analysis. The Guide notes that the gap analysis should be included as a standard service and should not entail an additional fee.

- Check whether quotes for bespoke development work are fixed or based on actual time taken - and agree limits if it is the latter.
- Find out if the supplier will provide a dedicated project manager and, if so, check on the previous experience of this person.
- Thoroughly evaluate all potential systems to ensure they provide a complete solution and incorporate all of the elements needed to meet your organisational goals – the Guide provides a list of key system features for reference.

Performing a risk assessment on each supplier's plan is a critical part of the process. High risk factors identified by the Guide include:

- Any bespoke development that is critical to go-live implementation.
- Any deliverable that is not accurately defined.
- Any time schedule that cannot be met by a supplier.
- Any software that has not been tested.

Medium risk factors include issues such as:

- Bespoke development not critical to live operation.
- Data conversion/collection requirements.
- Hardware installations or upgrades.
- Software installation and testing.
- Sub-contracted resources.
- Third party supplier involvement.

Low risk factors cover items including consultancy, training, auditing and technical support. The Guide advises companies to give their project manager responsibility for mitigating risks by allowing for unforeseen issues and to build in time for glitches so that deadlines can still be met.

Once a project reaches the implementation stage, setting realistic timescales and defining detailed project deliverables with the supplier are two of the most important success factors. According to RAM, unrealistic expectations are a major source of project breakdowns – two months from order to implementation may be realistic for a start-up company, but a project for a large established intermodal company with legacy system issues could take much longer.

Another key factor during implementation is ensuring buy-in and

awareness among users. The Guide points out that staff will need to provide third-party vendors with information and data, plus their knowledge and interpretation of system requirements. They will also be provided with plans and told by the supplier what is expected of them and by when. Projects can stall when staff members are too busy, resistant, or unprepared to meet supplier needs.

to allow for system refinements between testing and live operation.

Once the new system has gone live, it is important to continually monitor and evaluate its performance and approach the supplier immediately with any questions or concerns. Suppliers should provide regular feedback on any items referred to them, including weekly plans for resolving any outstanding issues. The Guide also advises companies to continue as-



Intermodal asset management: set strategic goals and identify very clearly what your organisation wants to achieve upon implementation

Data conversion/collection and loading may be required during installation and it can take a long time to provide the data. The Guide therefore advises that the method for achieving this is defined early in the project to help ensure that all information is ready when the supplier needs it.

Testing the new installation against project deliverables and system requirements is a vital part of the process. To ensure that this phase runs smoothly and to schedule, users should be trained on the new system well in advance and a clear test programme agreed. Adequate time must also be built into the project

sessing whether any further customisation is required – something that may only become apparent after a few months of using a new system and to maintain regular contact with the supplier, particularly concerning possible product enhancements and upgrades.

The Intermodal Management Evaluation Guide is available free of charge from Real Asset Management in PDF or hard copy version. To request a copy, please call +44(0)1689 892111 or email solution@realassetmgt.co.uk

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