The Professional Services ERP Solution of the Future

Business and Industry Focus
For many years, analysts, management consultants and clients have pinned down the importance of focusing on individual verticals, encouraging ERP solution providers to develop and deliver solutions for specific industries. When a project-focused organization starts looking for a new ERP solution, there are some crucial steps it needs to take: Analyze the industry focus and product strategy of a potential vendor, look at the vendor’s client references and examine whether the solution really has the deep industry-specific capabilities the supplier claims it has. Some of the vital industry trends we see these years are:

- increased focus on streamlining the sales process and managing client relations – integrated to project management and customized for the unique challenges and demands faced by project-focused organizations
- strong interest in improved capacity and resource planning – integrated to project management and project planning
- greater demands for proactivity and usability – for instance by having a solution that actively notifies and alerts users on their pending actions via web portal, e-mail or SMS

A Role-Based, Process-Oriented Solution
It seems patently obvious that an ERP solution deployed to support the processes of an organization should be process-oriented. However, we still see many solutions with a fundamental focus on features and functionality. We do acknowledge that ERP solution providers are starting to talk more about role-based and process-oriented solutions. Having delivered role-based, process-oriented solutions for more than a decade, we have seen what a tremendous difference this makes for the actual use and usability of the solution. It is of vital importance for a project-focused organization to have a role-based, process-oriented ERP solution, since all employees normally use the solution, but where vast internal differences exist in frequency of use, skill levels and attitudes toward the ERP solution among different types of users.

Smart and Flexible Business Intelligence
A growing number of project-focused organizations are starting to realize how valuable it is for them to develop their capabilities to make forward-looking analyses and decisions based on proactive planning and forecasting. To combine simplicity and the total cost of ownership related to proprietary reporting technology with the strength and flexibility of
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specialized Business Intelligence solutions, we decided to enter into an OEM collaboration with SAP Business Objects a few years ago. Enabling best-in-class Business Intelligence at a very affordable cost, this strategy addresses the following crucial challenges in project-focused organizations:

• Today Business Intelligence is in high demand at all levels of project-focused organizations. The BI solution needs to enable role-based reporting as well as smart, efficient report distribution and accessibility (scheduled reports distributed via e-mail and accessed from mobile devices, flexibility in formats – web, PDF, Office etc.)
• The ERP solution and the BI solution need to be seamlessly integrated to manage rapid changes and display past, present and future trends.
• The increased complexity of businesses and the use of a growing number of key figures, operational measures and KPIs make it vital to present information intuitively and visually appealing to decision-makers.
• While many industries use key figures with standard definitions, there are great variations in how project-focused companies define vital key figures such as yield, resource utilization, debit rate/billing rate, average hourly fee, project margin etc.

“App-ification” of the ERP Solution
Mobile “app”-focused platforms such as iOS and Android have shown how high availability and simplicity can create a user-friendly experience and more efficient use of information sources and systems. Apps developed to access narrowly defined and limited functionality in an ERP solution clearly show how you can achieve high user efficiency and related business improvements. We also see a distinct trend toward a more general “app-ification” related to traditional interfaces where narrowly defined and limited features and information from the ERP solution can be accessed via “widgets” directly on the computer desktop or as “embedded apps” in other systems or interfaces. An example of the latter is dedicated Web Parts for time capture or project reports embedded in the organization’s SharePoint portals.

Integration to Other Systems and Tools within the Company
For most users in a project-focused organization, the ERP solution will never be their central tool during a regular workday. They spend much more time on the phone, checking e-mails and updating their calendars, using Office applications, internal and external collaboration tools etc. Nevertheless, many of these daily tasks have (or should have) a direct or indirect impact on the organization’s ERP solution. As a business solution supplier we realized a long time ago that an ERP solution must be integrated to the existing technology, systems and data sources at the organizational level.

However, I don’t think all of our competitors are fully aware that the same approach should be used at the end-user level. In a future-proof role-based, process-oriented ERP solution, it is not essential for the end users to use the actual interface of the ERP solution – the ERP solution merely provides process optimization, business logic and control. To realize business improvements based on ERP technology, the users might just as well interact with the ERP solution indirectly via front-end/back-end systems, Outlook, Office applications, mini-apps, mobile platforms, SharePoint or other portals and collaboration tools. However, that requires an ERP solution with a service-oriented architecture as well as open and consistent integration capabilities.

Back to the Future
ERP solutions can be considered a fairly mature technology today. But in my opinion, ERP solutions for Professional Services organizations have yet to mature. Bearing the rapidly changing business world and the higher demands from new and existing clients in mind, developing and delivering ERP solutions is an extremely interesting, challenging and exciting endeavor. I look forward to re-reading this article in 2020 and reflect on the developments of the past decade.