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INTEGRATION – THE TECHNOLOGY TREND FOR BUSINESS IN 2015

As 2015 kicks into high gear for business – there is one technology trend that is the holy grail of businesses looking to expand their footprint – integration. Yet, despite its critical importance to business, most executives still don't understand exactly what is meant by technology integration.

For just about every national and multi-national business, especially those expanding throughout the African continent, integration within supply chains, logistics systems and even communications systems can be the difference between success or failure.

So what is integration and why is it so critical for business?

A simple definition is that integration is the ability for different software systems to communicate and share information in real time and to provide the end user with better insight into a specific process, issue or measurement.

In other words, if your software systems do not have the ability to communicate with each other or with those of your customers, suppliers and partners.– it's going to be very difficult for your managers to secure the information they need – making it extremely difficult to provide the services your customers demand and expect.

Additionally, it will be virtually impossible for your managers to secure the critical real-time data for accurate decision-making.

For South African businesses looking to expand their service footprint nationally, or across Africa, integration of technology systems needs to be a top priority. Many South African businesses are acquiring partners or expanding into new territories – without ensuring supply chain integration during this expansion process, chaos can ensue, resulting in poor decision-making and missed opportunities.

This issue is of particular relevance for businesses expanding across Africa, as supply chains in Africa are most often fragmented with little or no visibility within the total technology pipeline.

Many business supply chains will inevitably have to deal with legacy systems that can only report information on a specific area or cannot communicate with the larger software platform, making very difficult to get an overview of the performance of the total supply chain.

Finding a quick and simple integration solution – enabling all systems within the supply chain to communicate – from warehousing, transport, stock or trouble-shooting – is the only way for businesses to have the edge on competitors, whilst encouraging true collaboration amongst trading partners.

Parmalat is one such company whose rapid expansion into territories including Zambia, Botswana, Swaziland and Mozambique brought with it a range of data-collection issues. Critical data from various warehouses was stored on different platforms in different formats – meaning valuable resources had to be allocated to reformatting the data. This time-intensive process also meant that real time information was difficult to secure- making it virtually impossible to meet KPI's and to track performance.

Once a unique interface was developed specifically for Parmalat's needs – the team was able to generate reports and results within seconds on any internet enabled device. With training and on-going support, this integrated system has translated into savings on cost, time and resource allocation amongst other key benefits.

Integration then:

- Enables managers to make real time decisions based on accurate data
- Avoid bottlenecks / shortages and other stock issues
- Saves time & money on staff training
- Increase efficiencies – various divisions or role players can now interact in real time with one another
- Increase service levels to customers

Any business with plans to expand their supply chain across South Africa, or further afield, should first and foremost look at the various systems they may inherit and develop the appropriate strategies to integrate these systems.

There are a range of integration solutions that can be developed for companies from the small yet expanding

brand – to major multi-nationals. Don't let your system's inability to communicate destroy your expansion plans – in 2015 – it's time to integrate.

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