



Integration is key to success

Customer relationship management is only as good as its ability to integrate with the other systems used by a business, writes JJ Worrall.

According to Jonathan Boylan, chief technical officer at Fineos, the effective integration of customer relationship management (CRM) solutions with other business systems is as important as the quality of the CRM solution itself.

"A lot of people just see CRM as a customer database but, realistically, CRM often really has to include things like workflow or business process management nearly as much as the customer information," said Alan Moody, director of Mamut Ireland. "It's really a question of either getting a CRM solution that has integrated workflow or integrating workflow into your CRM solution."

Barry Ryan, director, consulting department, Deloitte, Claire Quinn of Deloitte said demanding customer expectations meant that an integrated approach to CRM was vital.

"Increasingly, the effectiveness of the sales, marketing and customer service operations of organisations is coming down to how effectively they combine the skills and knowledge of staff with robust systems and processes – all supporting a clear strategy for winning with customers.

"To solve complex problems that hamper clients' customer environments, technology is only part of the answer. A good CRM project needs a solid understanding of not just technology systems, but also business process, operations, communications, people and change."

Oliver Lynch, operations director with Graham Technology, said CRM was best used as a means to consolidate, rather than replace, existing business systems.

"This means it can be used to protect an organisations'

previous IT investments. In order to deliver consistent levels of high customer services across multiple channels, a CRM solution must provide the customer with the most appropriate information, over the most appropriate channels, at the most appropriate time," he said. Lynch advised companies to use CRM to leverage existing customer information to proactively manage customer relationships.

Before deciding on the most appropriate integration option, he advised companies to fully research the systems the CRM solution needed to be able to 'talk to'. To function effectively, he said CRM systems had to be linked to customer data or services contained in existing business systems. Giving the example of a telecommunications company, Lynch said the priority would be to link the CRM solution with its billing system, allowing it to proactively offer different product subscriptions to customers based on their usage over a period of time. Lynch said the system would also need to be able to tell the company when to offer 'add-on' products or discount levels to ensure continued customer satisfaction. "This would increase sales through targeting customers with a particular billing history," he said.

Boylan said customers could have several accounts with a financial institution, for example, such as mortgage, current account, savings account or credit card. "These would typically be managed on different back-end systems," he said. "The CRM has to be aware and understand the relationships between you and all those accounts, in order to give the person in the call centre a full view of your financial standing. "To have a single view on the internet, and a single view in the call centre, you need a CRM system to bring them all together." Boylan said CRM

generally fell into two categories, depending on whether it is used in sales servicing.

He said the 'individualistic' nature of sales meant said salespeople who used their own contact lists were, in effect, "keeping secrets" from each other.

"It's very mobile and tends to be laptop based with little central control," he said. "Whereas in the servicing section – from the call centre system, internet system and branch system – as a customer, you expect them to know you in the same way, that within five seconds of giving your name or account number your information is in front of them."

Moody said the cost of a fully integrated CRM solution was largely down to its complexity. He said it was possible to minimise integration costs by delivering CRM business processes in a phased approach.

Boylan said costs ranged from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of euro. "You could have a small out-of-the-box solution sure, but two of our clients in Britain have in excess of 4,000 users using our CRM system," he said. "When you have 4,000 people on it, you expect it to be very well integrated into the rest of the business and you have to pay for that." Moody said that, once an integrated approach to CRM was present in a company, the key to its success was 'process management'. Moody said that processes were a company's key intellectual property and that customer-facing processes were key to gaining and maintaining customers.

"The shift from data-centric to process-centric methods is happening right now," said Lynch. "It will be the major focus for companies over the next decade. Business process-driven CRM is the most powerful way to interact with customers.

Its management, measurement, and motivational influences on business are a major leap forward from the previous generation of CRM packages."

Commenting on the future developments in the industry, he said that recognising the nature of the people that make up the CRM database would be key. "Currently, CRM – in the realms of the contact centre – is not fulfilling people's desires," he said. "In the future, agents will be given the unified and integrated system portal, which will allow them to deal with any customer query and to resolve it from beginning to end, personally.

"The customer, likewise, will be presented with a vast array of options for contacting the organisation on a self-service basis. These will include texting, natural-language voice recognition, instant messengers, traditional web and digital TV. In this way, customers will be able to perform most tasks themselves and at their own convenience. This gives the human touch, which machines have been woeful at mimicking."

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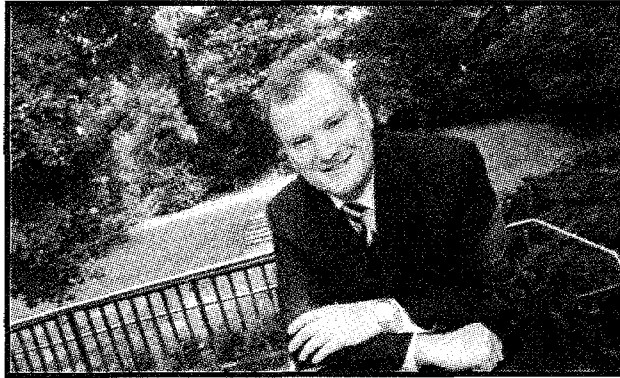
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Barry Ryan, director, consulting department, Deloitte