

Integrated or Best-of-Breed Systems

Maybe we should be asking different questions when choosing systems.

The argument over whether integrated hospitality management systems are superior to a combination of best-of-breed alternatives has been going on for years. It used to be argued that integrated systems lacked functionality compared to more specialized offerings, and weren't as complete as their proponents would have you believe. On the other hand, despite the best-of-breed systems' often-superior functionality the lack of decent links between them has often led to cumbersome operations based on inaccurate and incomplete data. Things have changed on both fronts, but real-world situations often demand compromises, and three other questions are actually becoming more important.

Integrated Systems

It's no secret that I'm generally in favor of minimizing the number of different systems that hotels have to deal with on property. Any time that data has to be transferred from one to another there's some potential for inaccuracy, given that the two systems' designers may not have meant quite the same thing by data elements with the same name. Further, despite the interface flexibility provided by HTNG and other Web-services approaches, staff needing to use multiple systems also have to deal with multiple user interfaces, often with very different look and feel characteristics. They often also have to research guest data in multiple systems to see the full picture.

An all-in-one integrated system that provides the right level of functionality across the board for a property's needs therefore has two major advantages. The users will see it as a seamless, uniform tool for all of their needs and will have confidence in the completeness of the data they see, leading to better guest service. Further, management will have access, in

real time, to accurate data from all parts of the operation in a single database, with all that this implies in terms of effective marketing and efficient management.

The fully integrated single-vendor system is no longer a myth. Several applications that integrate multiple traditionally separate areas (typically guest management, sales & catering, room reservations and activity bookings, sometimes also POS) have been around for many years but have always been partial solutions. However, there are now some that also include financial accounting, labor management and payroll to tie all these inputs into a complete hospitality ERP system providing real-time business intelligence. These include Cenium and IDS NEXT and Prologic First. Both IDS NEXT and Prologic First were developed in India and both have a sizable customer bases in Asia, Europe and Africa. Cenium was developed in Iceland and Norway and is now gaining steady acceptance in the United States and international markets.

Best-of-Breed Systems

On the other hand, best of breed systems have continued to expand specialized functionalities and integrations between them has improved tremendously. Some



Instead of making a utopian choice between integrated systems and best-of-breed combinations, perhaps we should be asking new questions.

of this has been through efforts such as HTNG's interface workgroups, which promote very clear understandings of which data elements mean what, and which are exchanged under well-described circumstances. The single guest itinerary is prob-

ably the best-known example, whereby spa, golf and other activity bookings are linked to a guest's room reservation, so that each system is made aware of changes in the others' bookings and all the details are collected into a single itinerary attached to the guest stay record. However, bookings in each system are still done using each application's user interface.

New specialized systems have achieved good success in recent years, especially when remotely hosted so that they can be configured and put into productive use very quickly. MTEch's HotSOS and Libra On Demand's CRM suite are good examples that combine very useful functionality with ease of implementation. However, while both help their immediate users become much more effective in their own sphere of operations, both also require tight integration with GMSs if their accumulated guest profile and history data is to be put to best use as part of the complete picture.

The Real World Interferes

It's been said that to optimize the whole you must sub-optimize the parts. The whole in this case is the complete operational scenario: the user experience, the consolidated data used by management

to maximize the effectiveness of its operations and marketing, and the ability to keep it all running with minimal effort. Given that, choosing the best possible point solution for a

single department will always introduce compromises somewhere else, and in an ideal world each property would implement a complete, fully functional ERP from a single vendor: one user interface, one database, one support number to call.

But the real world always interferes. For an existing property, replacing all of its systems in one massive upgrade takes a great deal of courage, project management and change management skill. Implementing one module at a time is usually far easier to get approved and financed, and so an integrated system stands a better chance of being sold if it can also operate in modular form. However, this always carries the need to develop new (and temporary) ways of data transfer between the old and new components until the transformation is complete, and inevitably adds many support complications and user challenges. It takes great leadership to keep such a project moving steadily to a successful, fully-integrated completion.

Even when a new property implements a complete ERP system from the start, things never stay the same. The hotel may be sold later to a new owner with several other properties all using a standard but different accounting or procurement system. For the sake of optimizing the new whole – the multi-property operation – the ERP modules may have to be replaced with the new owner’s standard applications. As a result, in the real world even the most capable ERP system must be modular and must be capable of working effectively with other vendors’ systems, and of course then we’re back in the multi-vendor, multi-system world.

Instead of making a utopian choice between integrated systems and best-of-breed combinations, perhaps we should be asking:



1. Given the functionality needed, which system or combination of systems provides the most seamless user interface, the most complete data consolidation and the most usable business intelligence?
2. Which allows for the later addition or substitution of components in the most seamless way, both to the users and to the operation?
3. Which vendor will take first-line support responsibility for my complete set of technology, now and as the mix of systems may change in the future?

Some vendors already offer first-line support of other applications used by their clients. Multi-Systems Inc. (MSI) provides a complete IT help desk for La Quinta and Extended Stay America, covering hardware and network issues as well as managing the resolution of problems with other vendors’ software. It will also be interesting to see how the current move toward service-oriented architecture (SOA) plays out with vendors such as Infor Hospitality (formerly SoftBrands) and PAR Springer-Miller. SOA makes it easier to plug multiple vendors’ products or modules into a core system, but will they also be incorporated into the core system’s UI? Will support for all of them be centralized?

Playing well with others has never been more necessary, but hoteliers are still looking for the most seamless solution available.

JON INGE is an independant consultant specializing in technology at the property level. He can be reached at jon@joninge.com or by phone at (206) 546-0966.