FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DATA INTEGRATION PROVIDER

You’ve taken the steps to prepare for your data integration project, you have identified the vital metrics that will drive the process, and armed with executive buy-in you go in search of software vendors who can help you accomplish your goals. What are some of the questions you should consider before calling on the vendors? What will be important to you?
Introduction

The concept of data integration is not a new one. Enterprise organizations have been using data integration to maximize key business drivers for well over two decades. From empowering financial drivers like order-to-cash cycles, to creating the foundation needed to deploy business critical strategies like Business Intelligence, data integration is at the core of creating a modern data infrastructure that allows data to become a key driver for the organization instead of a cost center. As mid-sized organizations embark on data integration projects and strategies, the first step is often learning where to go for help. While providers of data integration software and services for enterprise organizations are well-known and widely available, deploying these enterprise tools in mid-sized companies can often be limiting, due to cost constraints and length of deployment considerations.

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What mid-sized organizations need is a new breed of vendors and solutions that will allow them access to the tools they need to create viable data integration frameworks while providing the budget-friendly costs of acquisition and implementation a company needs in order to remain competitive and viable. As you embark on your search for such viable data integration providers, there are several questions that will allow you to select a partner that will make the process easier, affordable, and successful. While the considerations can be numerous, there are five key areas that any mid-sized company must carefully consider when choosing data integration software.

Is your vendor there to help?

DiCentral understands that even the most prepared of organizations often don’t have the necessary skills and experience. That’s where we come in - with our network of resellers and in-house staff we can give you as much - or as little - help as you need.

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Question 1. What exactly do I need?

One of the first aspects of selecting the right data integration vendor is the question of help. The assistance we are speaking of here, however, is not help in understanding the application – or even in understanding your data – rather it’s assistance in helping you determine how your business processes will be impacted by a data integration project. As you discuss data integration strategies with possible vendors, you need to explore how those vendors will help – or hinder – your company in identifying the key processes that are impacted by and that will impact your data integration design and deployment. Mid-sized companies have a level of flexibility and responsiveness that large enterprises lack – but they also suffer from lack of expertise that allows enterprise organizations to embark on daunting multi-month, often multi-year data integration deployments. It’s no wonder then that a recent Standish group report found that over 80% of data integration projects either failed or were completed well over budget and well beyond the timeline originally conceived.

Understanding how your business process will be impacted by your data integration project is critical to ensuring that your project will be a success. The reason for this is fairly simple: as you begin your data integration strategy you are most likely replacing either legacy – often manually coded – data integration and exchange applications or replacing manual data entry with an automated workflow. In either situation the success or failure of the data integration project is going to be heavily dependent on your understanding of (for example) how your orders are received and processed, what data is required by your ERP system, what data must be handed off to a warehouse management system, and how the process is affected at the other end. Not having access to this information will mean delays and cost over-runs. The key question to ask then is – will my vendor help me with these pre-integration questions or will they simply stand by and idly wait? At DiCentral, understanding how our customers will use our data integration products and how their operations will be impacted is always the first step. Regardless of the vendor you will select, ensure that you are working with a partner that is willing to help you to analyze the full impact of your decision before you commit.
How fast is fast?
Vendors often quote the “speed” of their solution - in any situation it’s critical to understand how the tests were performed to ensure that when you compare vendors you are looking at equivalent data.

Question 2. How fast is fast?

A 2005 study by research firm TDWI found that over 70% of respondents rated “performance and scalability” as their top concern for “critical features” that would be required in any data integration solution. In this era of multi-core, multi-Ghz desktop computers that are available to even entry-level consumers the question of performance might seem moot. The truth, however, is that having a scalable, high performance data integration solution has never been as critical as it is today. A 2008 Report by the Aberdeen Group on business intelligence found that over 70% of respondents reported data growth of over 40% over the previous year. The proliferation of tools for managing operations coupled with the ever-decreasing cost per megabyte of storage has meant that companies are beginning to store ever-increasing amounts of data on all aspects of their operations.

High performance is a critical aspect of selecting a data integration vendor. But how fast is fast enough? As a mid-sized organization looking to invest in a data integration solution, it’s critical to ask the vendor in question the parameters of their performance specifications. What kinds of tests were run to achieve the results quoted? What type of systems were involved? How were they configured? What network protocols were in use? To get the true measure of how a system will work in your environment you will ultimately need to use it in-house on your own data; for this reason it’s also critical to ask the vendor how they recommend you should proceed – they are, after all, the experts. At DiCentral our DiUnite data integration platform has been stress tested and rated as being capable of transferring as many as 20,000 records per minute under controlled tests. While we can’t guarantee that all our customers will be able to realize that type of performance, we also know and recommend that in order to optimize their data integration architecture the first step should be to deploy our DiUnite platform on a small subset of the systems and data that will ultimately need to be integrated. It is through this type of ‘start small’ strategy that our customers are able to deploy a fast data integration solution while also giving them the opportunity to optimize the solution for maximum performance in a larger deployment.

Question 3. I know I can’t do this...can you?

The previously quoted TDWI report on data integration also found that over 33% of respondents were concerned about their lack of IT data integration skills. This concern about the company’s ability to successfully use and deploy a data integration strategy is common. At DiCentral, the vast majority of our customers rely on us to perform most of the data integration work for them. As your organization embarks on a data integration project, one of the first questions to answer is where the domain expertise will reside for performing the data integration work. Does your IT staff have the ability to perform the work? Do you want to have domain expertise in-house after the project has been completed? When discussing your options with your vendor, make sure that you find out what options are available to you. Will the vendor work with you to design some of the initial maps required as a learning process for your IT staff? Does the vendor have the resources to take over the entire data integration project? Will you be able to come back at a later time and change your mind?

Having the right level of flexibility is paramount for small and mid-sized organizations where IT resources are often few and stretched to the limit. Having a vendor by your side that is capable and ready to take on the majority of the work will be a critical aspect of selecting the right partner. At DiCentral, we work with our clients in the manner that best suits their present and future needs. We can do all the data integration work for them, give them a “learn as we work” approach where we train them by actually deploying some of their initial data integration maps or by enlisting the help of one of our value-added resellers (VARs) that are either geographically or technically closer to our customer needs.
Is it really inexpensive?

A “low cost” data integration solution may end up being more expensive than you first considered. How much will it cost to get help if you get stuck? Consider more than just the bare cost of the software when evaluating the total cost of ownership.

Question 4. How “cheap” is cheap?

In the 2006 survey, TDWI found that 78% of respondents used total cost of ownership (TCO) and license and support fees as the single largest determining factor when selecting a data integration solution provider. The question of cost, however, must be taken far deeper than simply looking at licensing and support fees. Many mid-sized organizations often don’t have the time or the in-house skill set needed to properly analyze total cost of ownership across multiple possible vendors. With pricing methodologies that often hide fees in complicated deployment and support contracts, it’s very easy for even the most sophisticated organization to become entangled in contracts that ultimately prove to be significantly costlier than was originally thought

When selecting your data integration vendor, ensure that you get a clear and concise understanding of their fees. What will happen if the project is not finished in the time projected? How will exceptions be handled? What will be covered by the support and maintenance agreement and what won’t? Getting as clear a picture as feasible of all the costs associated with a data integration deployment will allow you to create a true Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) picture that can be used as a valuable tool in selecting your vendor of choice. At DiCentral we provide up-front, firm quotes to our prospective customers and we go through great lengths to explain what is covered by the price and what is outside the scope of the price. Our maintenance and support packages are designed to provide as little or as much hand holding and support as our customers need because we understand that not all companies are alike.

Question 5. Are you willing to say NO?

As you embark on the search for a data integration vendor, it’s important to keep in mind one critical factor – not all vendors are good at all things. This statement may seem obvious, but you might think otherwise from listening to many data integration providers. Choosing a vendor with a high degree of focus is critical. Vendors that are willing to take on any project – regardless of their expertise – are more likely to get bogged down in “learning as they work” – making the process slower and far more error prone than it should be. Regardless of how much expertise your vendor of choice has in your type of data integration, it’s important to explore what their boundaries are. Even though they may be experts at the type of data integration project you present, their willingness to take on riskier projects will ultimately impact their ability to provide you with the resources needed to complete the work on time and on budget as they divert resources to riskier projects that are falling further behind. At DiCentral, we understand our expertise and the ability of our DiUnite data integration platform. We will ask you the right questions up-front and give you as close to an immediate answer as possible on our willingness to take on your project, ensuring that you spend as little time as possible in pointless discussions and can focus your attention on deploying your data integration solution.
Summary

Selecting the right data integration vendor can be a daunting task. While Total Cost of Ownership is certainly a key in making the right decision it should not be the only one. There are several critical aspects of selecting the right vendor for your situation that can make the difference between a successful data integration deployment vs. becoming one of the 80% of companies that end up abandoning their data integration goals altogether.

About DiCentral

Founded in 2000, today DiCentral is a leading global innovator in the EDI (Electronic Data Interchange) industry segment. A broad range of Software plus Services solutions enables a seamless exchange of data throughout supply chain networks. DiCentral’s integration solutions are scalable to the size, growth, and unique requirements of each business. In addition, DiCentral develops and markets a complementary suite of supply chain applications for retailers and suppliers, including EDI Testing, Global Enablement, Web EDI, Managed Services, and more.

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