

Selecting Your Archiving Solution

Top 3 Factors to Consider

There are many drivers for and benefits to implementing an archiving and electronic data discovery solution, but every organization's expectations and use of the solution will vary. While the major themes may be the same across two organizations, differences in size and scale, data types, languages, organizational penetration, and/or geographic distribution may make one solution a great fit for one organization but make it not work at all for the other. Given the number of products on the market, the amount of time required to discern the differences between them, and the ever-changing needs of the organization, how does one choose the right solution?

While the answer to this question is very difficult to convey concisely in one document, I considered my experiences over the last 10 years in this industry and have identified the following features as being a necessity in any archiving solution that is to service an organization in both today's and tomorrow's business landscape:

1. Flexibility & Scalability

The future is full of surprises. Choosing a solution that is non-scalable and unforgiving of change puts you at an immediate disadvantage in being able to adapt to the requirements that will come from the business, the users, or the ever-changing regulations and legal precedents being set. Very rarely have I seen an organization that knew all current and future requirements for the solution at the time of selection, and of those few, even fewer held true to those initial requirements over time.

Flexibility should span the solution, encompassing both the database platform leveraged and the archive repository storage infrastructure used, as no business should be negatively impacted when it comes to its ability and agility to realign itself with competing vendors in order to reduce costs and increase its competitiveness.

The solution should also accommodate the common mistakes and misunderstandings made by organizations early on, as it is easy to get excited about the benefits and changes that an archiving and discovery solution can bring about, sometimes leading us to bite off more than we can chew initially. This could relate to a decision being made about what data should be targeted for archiving, when should that data be archived, how long should the data be kept, and how quickly can the space be regained in the native original source. It could also relate to having decided to implement a single centralized site that archives into itself remote, geographically distributed spoke sites for Global Single Instance Storage, which works perfectly until a division in the Northeast is spun off and acquired by another organization. Conversely, it's possible that an organization deploys infrastructure at each spoke site only to learn the next year that the high-bandwidth MPLS cloud connection required to consolidate all sites has finally been approved and corporate infrastructure is being moved to a new data center in the Midwest.

In This Issue:

- Flexibility & Scalability
- Extensibility
- Proven Technology, Proven Results

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The point here is that flexibility in general, and even flexibility of scale, must be intentionally built into the software solution as a design criteria; if it wasn't, choosing "just enough solution for our needs today" may have far reaching implications tomorrow.

Can the product grow with you? Have you chosen a product that works well for the users you have now but that cannot scale to support the 50% growth year-over-year, organic and otherwise, that is being projected for the next five years? If not, the question becomes: How long do we have, and what happens if we guess wrong?

Flexibility and scalability are key.

2. Extensibility

If an organization doesn't want to fall victim to buying "just enough solution for our needs today," it stands to reason that not only should the product scale to support more users/sites, but it should also be capable of extending its reach within the organization as the business becomes ready to reap the greater benefits that come hand in hand with farther-reaching integration.

For most early adopters of archiving, the main business driver was storage management of the email platform. Early archiving solutions thus focused on and around email. File archiving followed suit as businesses began to see the value of being able to retain and search for content that had been created, and of having a way to manage the explosive growth of the file servers. So valuable was the data being stored on file servers that many organizations tried to put in place solutions to better organize, share, and control the content that was being created, contributing to the phenomenal growth and prevalence that Microsoft® SharePoint® has had. The archiving solutions then started to support the archiving of SharePoint document libraries, as SharePoint itself has significant scalability limits.

Even most of today's top-rated archiving solutions are extensible only up to this point. The problem of course is that when you select an archiving solution, you're choosing a solution for the long term, a solution you're counting on to grow in step with your needs. But unless the extensibility is already built into the product, you are taking a very significant risk, as in today's economic climate there are no guarantees that your chosen vendor will even be in business in the future, never mind still enhancing the solution you purchased.

The best risk mitigation decision you can make, then, is to choose a solution that already has the extensibility built in to cover all the functionality you may ever need, such as Database Archiving, Advanced Data Visualizations, Automatic Classification, Desktop Legal Hold, Early Case Assessment, Real-Time Security Synchronization, Audio and Video Indexing, and more.

3. Proven Technology Helps, but It Isn't Enough—You Really Need Proven Results

Many software vendors today focus their core development on incrementally pushing the limits of their technology, always trying to outpace and out-feature their competitors, to at least maintain their market share. While this competitive nature breeds more competition, and therefore better, more capable products, I submit that it is not enough.

In today's market, archiving is commonplace. There are now two or three well-established solutions that are deeply entrenched in many of the world's largest enterprises, certifying them as being already fully vetted and battle proven. This implies that the risk once associated with being an early adopter of a newly founded technology is well behind us, yet there is still an inherent uneasiness that comes with being, or feeling like you are, the first implementation your software provider has performed.

This uneasiness stems not from these products, but rather from knowing that owning the fastest car in the race simply isn't enough to guarantee a podium finish. No car can win if not supported by the right pit crew or if not placed in the hands of a world-class driver.

This is why I maintain that today, more than ever, there is tremendous value that can be gained by an organization through choosing a credible value added reseller (VAR). A true VAR sees beyond the incremental license revenue generated by the purchase of a given product, as a VAR's means for growth is based on forming long-term relationships with its clients. These partnerships are fueled by prior successes and go well beyond a single product.

Selecting the right solution means more than choosing the right software technology. It requires choosing the right team both internally and externally. When selecting your partner, remember to consider its technical merits, such as depth of bench for both implementation and support services, as they will become your pit crew. Finally, and most important, don't forget that your partner's experience, best practices, and track record will keep you clear of potholes and on the fastest line, turning your internal team into world-class drivers.

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