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Software Vendor Assessment

Buying IT components could be a difficult task in today's office. There are very few happy times when the reputation, market recognition, quality and usability of IT components choose for us, so we buy a "de facto" standard and we know that there are no mistakes that we can make.

However, most of the time, we have to go through a daunting process of comparing products from multiple angles, but in most cases we would use no strict procedures in order to purchase the product that would really be suitable for you.

I will try to give you some information on how to choose efficiently and not make costly mistakes. While there are no absolute rules in that respect, common business sense applies to this process.

After the completion of this paper you should know how to:

- Minimize the time involved in ordering.
- Minimize the overall cost of software acquisition and operation.
- Maximize the value of the software investment.
- Assure operational compatibility with existing systems and adherence to established standards.
- Comply with licensing requirements.

Best approach to use when choosing a software

Do your job of getting information properly before getting third-party advice.

Always start with jotting down your needs. What is your purpose and what features would suit your needs best must be the key aspects of your search. Don't overestimate, do not buy software for features you will never use, but take into account that rarely used complex functions can save the day when the time comes. The right balance for a software package is a fine line between features, usability, user interface, customer support, easy to read and understand manuals or training courses.

Draw-up a list of features you would need from the software. Buy the software as a tool, not as a toy. Functionality is prime.

Find any industry standards related to the operations your software needs to cover.

Define a budget.

If necessary, seek additional expertise to identify best choice of product. Highly specialized or new technology may require more time.

Identify licensing needs for each possible product alternative.

Make a feature comparative list for the competitive features you would need. Use the Internet as a valuable tool for finding comparative analysis between different software packages. Most of the serious vendors will provide on their websites comparative analysis between their product and competitor's. Try to find comparative features lists from several vendors, as inevitably the feature list of any supplier will be a bit skewed in their favor.

Do not underestimate the power of open source, shareware or even freeware. Sometime there are real gems there. However, evaluate correctly the support and maintenance issues. For most of the time, support groups can cover a lot of the issues that can appear in normal installation and usage.

Search for user reviews from reputable sources. Bear in mind that if the number of reviews is small, the average can be extremely skewed, based on very particular experiences. Other users experience can help a lot, as well as expert competitive reviews. There are good independent reviews in computer magazines and their websites.

Choose two or three vendors based on the features and prices. Search if the vendors you choose give the option of downloading or demonstrating trials before you buy. Do not download or install trials before deciding on a short list of suppliers, as installing a bad piece of software can sometimes produce real big headaches.

If you have an old software doing the same function, see if you have any competitive upgrade options from the new vendors. This option will work as a trade-in for your old software.

Seeks quotes from appropriate vendors. Preferred vendors typically respond in less than a day. Complex systems and/or less efficient vendors may require multiple days for a quote. Select quote based on price, quality, delivery date and service expectations.

Check the system requirements for each software package you find. There might be hardware implications, as well as software implications. The hardware implications could mean a much bigger memory (fortunately quite cheap these days), bigger hard drive (cheap as well), a backup device (this could be a really expensive piece of equipment, but it always is a good investment). The software system requirements could mean that the proposed package needs a domain or a server to work on, in which case your investment could be substantially bigger that the package you wish to buy.

Regarding the hardware equipment, balance a few facts that might help you take better decisions. If your computer is older than 3 years, you might consider buying a new one. Today's mainstream computers are strong enough to run any standard application. Even if your old computer still seems capable, take into account that a computer of three years or more can give you problems. Changing the computer before starting to use a new application will save you the hassle of transferring and re-configuring it on a new computer when the time comes, which can be much harder than the initial installation.

Check the support options you have for the software packages. Sometime, you can buy the software as a service (SaaS), so you can offset the initial payment, though over time you will pay license fees, as long as you use the service. This option can have several advantages, as a team of professionals will be able to take

care of your software implementation. SaaS can be offered as a hosted solution, in which case your supplier has to take care of all the implications - support, training, infrastructure, backups, and security costs, as well as handling upgrades. Software as a service is an option that’s becoming more popular, as the connectivity becomes much easier day by day.

With SaaS, rather than paying a big amount upfront for a license, plus the associated costs for infrastructure, professional services and maintenance, companies typically pay for the use of the software on a monthly, per-user basis. However, in some situations it is clever to keep all the software and infrastructure in the house for security reasons. For such cases, some SaaS vendors offer software appliances that are to be installed on the user's premises.

After deciding on a shortlist of softwares you would be willing to try, get the trials or demos or ask the supplier for a demonstration. Most vendors will offer at least one of the options, of which you should really take advantage. Schedule your tests, as the demo period is usually not longer than 30 days. Don't be discouraged by the first problems you encounter with the software and do not be shy to ask the supplier about the big or even small problems that you encounter.

During the trial, you should write a list of comparative features of the products you analyze. That should be at the end so as to help to draw up the conclusion of what package you should buy.

Keep the trials as long as possible. Some features or bugs could be visible only with larger quantities of data introduced or longer usage.

Try to look into the future. In my experience I encountered a case when a cheaper solution was taken, rather than a more expensive solution, which was an industry standard. At the time of the decision, it looked right to go to the cheaper solution, but after three years, because of some market movements, the customer had to make a much costlier move to the solution they didn't buy initially. The cost of the conversion was sky high. The costs involved at least data conversion, people training, the hassle of dealing with two vendors, at least one being unhappy that the customer left, and disturbance because the conversion process didn't go so smoothly.

Certainly, this analysis could be much faster and shorter if the software package you buy is of lesser importance, if there are industry standards in place or you have the right consultants.

If you have a trustful IT person in your house or a consultant, bear in mind that this person can be much more qualified in helping you decide. Many years of experience will help a lot when deciding to buy a new software package. There are certain facts related to vendors, compatibilities, and system requirements that an experienced IT person can see much easier than yourself.

Do’s and Don’ts when buying software

DO	**DON'T**
Inform yourself.	...act at the first impulse. Even if you heard from your best friend that a certain piece of software is “brilliant”, it might not be the same for you.
Get competent expert advice.	Even if you have a lot of experience, don't ignore expert advice.
Define a budget. Be prepared that some additional costs could be hidden because of the incompatibilities of your actual system and the need to convert the data.	Don't get stuck on the budget, be prepared to revisit it.
List the features you need.	Don't buy the best software that has a lot of features but which you will never need.
Bear in mind that software is a tool.	Don't buy the software because it is shiny, never ignore the functionality.
Compare a few products.	Don't jump to conclusions before evaluating the different packages.
Find if there are any industry standards relating to your software needs.	
Check system requirements.	Don't ignore expert advice, sometime a small word like “domain” or “server” could mean a lot of hassle and investment.
Choose a licensing model (license, software-as-a-service, open-source).	Don't choose a costly option against an open-source or even freeware option, just because there is cost involvement in the first. Sometime you can get a better option for free than for money.
Test before you buy.	Don't test all the softwares you can get. Decide on a shortlist before starting to test.
Read user reviews.	Don't take user reviews as absolute, especially if the number of reviews is small.
Read expert comparative reviews.	Use your common sense and do not be fascinated by what the press or the media has to say about a product because there is no point in buying the best on the market without having any need for most of its valuable features.
Go for a reputable vendor if possible. Go for the reputation, even if a slightly bigger price is involved or some features are missing. Features that exist but aren’t working properly are useless.	Don't ignore the power of Open-source, where huge communities could be behind the product. This is especially valid for web applications, like e-commerce and content management systems.
Do not forget that you are searching for a software to ease your burden. So, if a software adds to your burden, the whole exercise itself is futile. Therefore, be careful and discerning while choosing.	

Freeware, shareware or commercial?

Freeware programs are either distributed for the love of humanity, for fame, or as stripped down versions of programs that cost money. For the most part, this is the domain of the independent, or "freelance," developer. Remarkably, some of the very best programs for use on the Internet are completely free. Most freeware, even though it's not commercially sold, is copyrighted by the author. Always check the license agreement if you consider using the application for anything other than your personal use.

PROBLEMS

1.Your support, if any, will be limited to e-mail, but the support level is much lower than with shareware anyways. You will rarely be able to get an e-mail response from a free software developer. Their attitude seems to be, (but this is only our opinion), that: "I spent a lot of time developing it and I gave it to you for free. I don't have time to answer all the e-mails I get each day."

2.There are unscrupulous people who use the freeware concept to download junk (like a computer virus) into your computer.

3.Some freeware requires that you also download large support files containing a special code to run the software.

4.There are proverbs that say: "You get what you pay for," and "Let the buyer beware."

5.Some freeware may be difficult, or impossible, to remove. Sometimes, a bad written code can disable essential functions like web browsing and all Internet access!

ADVANTAGES

1.Of all the words in the English language, FREE has to be one of the nicest.

Shareware Software

This type of software is, for the most part, commercially developed, but usually by smaller companies. These companies do not market in stores, but sell worldwide on the Internet. They can sell for less because it costs less to advertise.

Unlike commercial software, it’s hard to find fault with shareware. This is probably the main reason for its popularity. There are only a few problems we can think of.

PROBLEMS

1.Your support will likely be by e-mail, although many offer limited phone support.

2.The software may have a few bugs in it because of a smaller customer base, and lack of the (usually) extensive "beta tests" performed by large corporations. It’s often the case with shareware that YOU become a member of the beta test team when you download it!

3.There seems to be an increasing tendency among shareware developers to follow the lead of commercial marketers by selling "subscriptions" for up-dates.

ADVANTAGES

1.You can try the software for FREE! The trial period varies, but is usually in the 10 to 30 day range. If you do not like the software, just delete it and look for something better. Be CAREFUL that the software has an un-installer built-in or can be removed with "Add/Remove Programs."

2.In general, prices are much lower than for comparable commercial software.

3.Frequently a small developer will listen to you and may even include your suggestions in up-dates. Try getting THAT from a large corporation!

4.You are likely to find a MUCH greater variety of shareware software. In our opinion, this is because the small companies are trying to find their "niche" and are more creative. Large corporations have already found their niche, and are wary of taking chances.

Commercial Software

Much of it, but not all, is commercial software of the kind you may buy at a store. Many of the companies that produce it are leaders in the industry. In general, these companies stand very well behind their products. Still, there are a few things to keep in mind:

PROBLEMS

- Usually you cannot test the software to see if you like it. There are exceptions, big companies have started to give trial options to the potential customers.
- Most of the time, you won’t be denied a refund for a "just cause", but it may take time at a store to exchange it or get a refund.
- If bought online, "return" policies are often unclear; you might want to ask questions first by e-

mail.
- Getting help from a real person over the phone is almost impossible and most likely will not be free.
- There may be "hidden costs" in that, nowadays, you may have to pay for a "subscription" to keep the software up to date.

ADVANTAGES

- You're usually dealing with industry leaders and will be likely to get a good product.
- You can pay for support which is often available 24/7. If you are a business, this may be an advantage.
- There are little worries about downloading a virus or other built-in "nasty".

Conclusion

There is much debate on the subject of freeware, shareware, and commercial software. There are proponents of each, and those against each. What it comes down to really is YOU. How do you feel? What "works" for you? What do you need to fulfill YOUR needs? Do what makes sense to you, but be careful!

Tips for buying software online

Buying software online can be tricky, especially if you are new to shopping via the cyberspace. Whether you are upgrading an existing software packet or looking for a specific program to set up, the procedure will be a pot less complicated if you recognize what to look for.

Software Buying Tip # 1
Read client reappraisals. Many popular online shops, such as Cnet, Softpedia, Tucows, let users to go forth their remarks about a particular ware. Reading other client reappraisals may assist to do your determination easier because it gives you an thought of others who have underwent the ware firsthand.

Software Buying Tip # 2
When considering any type of software, make sure that it is compatible with your computer. Most software requires a specific processor type, a certain amount of memory, and a certain amount of free hard drive space. The reason is because, in order for software to function properly at quickly, the computer must be able to handle the application. By being familiar with your computer's configuration, you will be able to select the right software.

Software Buying Tip # 3
Become familiar with the software by reading it's description and capabilities. Before purchasing any type of software, you should make sure that it is exactly what you want or will enjoy learning. Often times, after software is opened, there is no refund policy for buyer's remorse.

Software Buying Tip # 4
Purchase software from a reputable company. This will ensure customer service, reliability, quality products and timely shipment. By purchasing software from a reliable source, you will also ensure that the title is authentic and not an illegal copy.

Software Buying Tip # 5
The best part of shopping for software online is the competition. Because there are so many retailers, prices are more competitive than if only one store had the software that you want. Shop around and compare prices before making a final decision.

Software Buying Tip # 6
When making a purchase online, consider using a credit card. Most credit card companies provide a dispute resolution process, which is beneficial if the product is not delivered, is not as advertised or is damaged and the company will not stand behind the transaction.

Software Buying Tip # 7
If purchasing from another individual, such as often the case with online auctions, confirm that the software has all manuals and/or product keys to ensure proper installation.

Software Buying Tip # 8
Learn about the company's return, refund and/or exchange policy. In many cases, especially with software, the company may refuse to accept the product back for a refund. However, there is always the possibility that a program is damaged or doesn't function properly, in which case the store should honor the purchase with an exchange for the same title. When buying software online, it's best to purchase from a store that is reasonable when it comes to exchanges if not refunds.

Software Buying Tip # 9
When purchasing software online, take a moment to look at the company's shipping costs, methods and availability of a way to track the package following shipment.

Software Buying Tip # 10
Common payment methods include credit cards, checks and/or money orders. If you want to purchase software online, you will need to do so from a company that accepts a convenient payment method. If you do not have a credit card, most companies will accept a mailed payment. Most companies, however, recommend not sending cash.

Licensing compliance

Thanks to software, your business is more efficient and your workers more productive.
But to get the most out of your software, you have to manage it well, just as you would any other valuable company asset. Poor software management robs your company of the full value of the productivity and efficiency of software. Poor software management can also easily mask software piracy, which is the installation or use of unauthorized copies of software. Software piracy is against the law and can have very costly consequences to your business.
Illegal software is more likely to fail, rendering your computers and their information useless. You can expect no warranties or support for illegal software, leaving your company on its own to deal with such a failure. Illegal software is also one of the prime sources of computer viruses that can destroy valuable data throughout a company.
There are legal penalties as well, including stiff penalties and criminal prosecutions, for every act of software piracy. The software industry is vigilant and vigorous in its pursuit of software pirates, because they increase costs to users of legitimate, authorized software, and decrease the capital available to invest in research and development of new software.

The Benefits of Effective Software Management

PROPERLY MANAGING YOUR COMPANY'S SOFTWARE AS A VALUABLE ASSET HAS MANY ADVANTAGES.
The most significant is cost control. Software can represent 25 percent of the budget for information technology. So it makes good fiscal sense to keep a close eye on what you spend to acquire software, to support and train your staff to use it, and on the hardware you need to make it work. A good plan means your company buys only the software that it needs to use, employees only use properly licensed software, pays to upgrade only what's being used, and can enjoy volume discounts by planning purchases and upgrades.
The key step to cost control is budgeting for software as a separate expenditure line item. There are two benefits to this. First, you can plan software purchases and upgrades in an orderly way. With a separate software budget, you can anticipate needs and avoid excessive spending or unexpected costs. The second benefit to having a software budget is to be able to track purchases accurately so that you can more easily spot unauthorized copies of software in your enterprise.
When you purchase only the authorized software you need, you cut down on upgrade costs as well. Because you know what products are being used in what quantity, you upgrade only those copies where the new features will be of use. And a coordinated upgrade policy ensures that your entire business keeps pace with industry standards and technology improvements.
Controlling software purchases and upgrades can mean savings on hardware as well. By placing software only on the computers of employees who need it, you can avoid having to upgrade, add, or replace hardware for employees who don't need the capacity. And by deleting unneeded software from your computers you free up space for data or other software and avoid having to add storage space.

Proper software management saves time, money, makes employees more productive, keeps software and information compatible throughout the business, and makes it easier for your business to adapt to change.

Risks of Illegal Software Use

Just like movie video tapes or audio CDs, computer software is intellectual property that's owned by the people who created it. Without the express permission of the manufacturer or publisher, it is illegal to use software no matter how you got it. That permission almost always takes the form of a license from the publisher that accompanies authorized copies of software. When you "buy" software, what you're really doing in almost every case is purchasing a license to use it. Rather than owning the software, you acquire limited rights to use, reproduce, and distribute the program, according to the terms spelled out in the license.
Normally, a licensed copy of a program can be installed and used on only one computer at a time, although there are usually provisions allowing you to make a "backup" copy for archival or disaster recovery purposes. If you don't comply with the terms of the license – for example, by installing the same copy of a single-user program on several computers – that's software piracy. The publisher can take legal action against you or your business.
The license isn't the only way in which software is protected. Copyright and sometimes patent law protects software from unauthorized copying, distribution, and sale. The law also recognizes the Internet, and prohibits users from uploading, downloading, or transmitting unauthorized copies of software online. An individual who breaks these laws, or a company that looks the other way when an employee does, is liable to civil and criminal action. The consequences range from public embarrassment through adverse publicity to

significant civil damages, criminal fines and even the possibility of imprisonment.
Using illegal copies of software has other serious consequences. Software publishers offer their legitimate customers a wide array of products services besides the copy of the program itself: user manuals and other documentation, notification of problems, training, support services, repairs and upgrades. A legitimate copy also ensures you that you're getting the quality product produced by the rightful owner of the program.
An illegal copy enjoys none of these benefits. Further, it could well be an outdated version of the software, a test copy with bugs, an improperly made copy that can damage data, or hide a damaging virus. Any one of these problems could quickly escalate into costly damage recovery far more expensive than the money you "saved" by buying illegal software.
Illegal software cheats its creators out of their fair reward for the innovation they have created and cheats your company out of the full value of the software. And it could well damage your data, tarnish your business reputation, subject you to fines or even land you in prison. In short, using pirated software is bad business for everyone.

MANAGING SOFTWARE WELL IS A FOUR-STEP PROCESS

1. Before anything else, your company culture must be one in which all your employees understand the value of software, learn the difference between legal and illegal use, and pledge their commitment to the proper use of software. To do this, you must have a clear statement of policy. The statement should express the company's goals to manage software for maximum benefit, deal only in legal software, and spell out the company's procedure for acquiring legal software.
2. Once you have a policy, your next step is to take inventory of your software assets. Only by knowing what programs are installed on all the computers in your organization – desktops, laptops, and any copies of programs from work installed by employees on their home computers – can you determine how to proceed. Once the inventory is completed, you should carefully store the documentation, original copies of your software and other material in a secure place. That way, you can take advantage of services, upgrade offers and the like from publishers, and be more easily able to reinstall software in case of a disaster.
3. With your inventory in hand, you can compare the software that's installed on your company's computers to what's allowed under the terms of your licenses. (Remember that some licenses allow you to make a certain number of copies of a program from a single source, or to have a limited number of users use the software at the same time from a network. The original license will tell you how many.) Also remember that simply having an original CD or floppy disk for the software doesn't necessarily mean you have authorized copies. Only the original license gives you the right to use the software and spells out the terms.
Based on the inventory, upgrades, new purchases, and input from employees, you can now create a formal list of the software that your company will allow its employees to use. It should include program names, serial numbers, version numbers, number of copies or users permitted by the license, the computers on which the copies are installed, and plans to add, upgrade or discard the software in future.
4. Effective software management is a continual process. You need to monitor adherence, guard against the introduction of illegal software, keep your list of supported software up to date, and plan ahead for the next three years. It makes sense to have someone within your company responsible for the process, in order to centralize the job.
Periodically, it's a good idea to perform spot checks on individual computers to make sure illegal software has not been inadvertently or deliberately installed. It also makes sense to conduct an inventory every year, as you might for other valuable assets. When employees leave the company, make sure the software they worked with remains with your company and that they do not take or keep copies.

Preventing Software Piracy In The Workplace

After you've put your software assets in good order, you'll still need to monitor your workplace for illegal software… There are five common types of software piracy, and understanding each will help you and your employees avoid the problems of illegal software.

End user piracy

End user piracy occurs when an employee of your company reproduces copies of software without authorization. End user piracy can take the following forms:

- Using one licensed copy to install a program on multiple computers;
- Copying disks for installation and distribution;
- Taking advantage of upgrade offers without having a legal copy of the version to be upgraded;
- Acquiring academic or other restricted or non-retail software without a license for commercial use;
- Swapping disks in or outside the workplace.

These practices must be prohibited.

Client-server overuse
Client-server overuse occurs when too many employees on a network are using a central copy of a program at the same time. If you have a local-area network and install programs on the server for several people to use, you have to be sure your license entitles you to do so. If you have more users than allowed by the license, that's "overuse." You can correct this problem by making sure employees understand the restrictions, by installing "metering" software that ensures only the licensed number of users have access, or by purchasing another license that covers the number of users you need.

Internet Piracy
intellectual property theft on the Internet constrains the software industry and significantly reduces its positive impact on economies throughout the world. There are thousands of pirate websites located on the Internet, and virtually every software product now available on the market can be located on one of these sites. Hence, Internet piracy represents perhaps the single greatest threat to electronic commerce.
While there are many publishers who offer authorized versions of their software for sale online, there are also numerous pirate operations on the Internet as well:

- Pirate websites that make software available for free download or in exchange for uploaded programs.
- Internet auction sites that offer counterfeit, out-of-channel, infringing copyright software.
- Peer-to-Peer networks that enable unauthorized transfer of copyrighted programs.

The same purchasing rules should apply to online software purchases as for those bought in traditional ways. Organizations should have a clear policy as to when, whether or with whose authorization employees may download or acquire software from Internet sites.
Below are some tips to help ensure that you are purchasing legal software on auction sites:

- If a price for a software product seems too good to be true, it probably is.
- Be wary of software products that come without any documentation or manuals.
- Beware of products that do not look genuine, such as those with hand-written labels.
- Beware of sellers offering to make "back-up"copies.
- Watch out for products labeled as academic, OEM, NFR or CDR.
- Be wary of compilations of software titles from different publishers on a single disk.
- Do not give out your credit card details unless you know it's a secure transaction.
- Check with organizations such as the BSA should you become a victim of software fraud.

Hard-disk loading
Hard-disk loading occurs when the business who sells you a new computer loads illegal copies of software onto its hard disk to make the purchase of the machine more attractive. The same concerns and issues apply when you engage a Value Added Reseller (VAR), sell or install new software onto computers in your office.
You can avoid purchasing such software by ensuring that all hardware and software purchases are centrally coordinated through your organization and all purchases are made through reputable suppliers. Most important, require receipt of all original software licenses, disks, and documentation with every hardware purchase.

Software Counterfeiting
Software Counterfeiting is the illegal duplication and sale of copyrighted material with the intent of directly imitating the copyrighted product. In the case of packaged software, it is common to find counterfeit copies of the CDs or diskettes incorporating the software program, as well as related packaging, manuals, license agreements, labels, registration cards, and security features. Sometimes it is clear the product is not legitimate, but often it is not. Look for the following warning signs:

- You're offered software whose price appears "too good to be true";
- The software comes in a CD jewel case without the packaging and materials that typically accompany a legitimate product;
- The software lacks the manufacturer's standard security features;
- The software lacks an original license or other materials that typically accompany legitimate products (e.g., original registration card or manual);
- The packaging or materials that accompany the software have been copied or are of inferior print quality;
- The software is offered on an auction site;
- The CD has a gold appearance, as opposed to the silver appearance that characterizes legitimate product;
- The CD contains software from more than one manufacturer or programs that are not typically sold

as a "suite";
- The software is distributed via mail order or online by sellers who fail to provide appropriate guarantees of legitimate product.

Proper software management takes time and effort. But the payback is well worth it. If you have followed the process outlined in this booklet, you have taken the steps necessary to get the full benefit from your software – and to eliminate your company's exposure to penalties for illegal software use.

Closing remarks

In closing we offer the following caveats:

- Prior to downloading anything, run your antivirus and/or spyware software to make SURE your computer is "clean," up-front. Run it again after the download. Is it still clean? Be wary of software you've downloaded that tells you, out of the blue, that: "you have a virus" or similar. It may be that this new software can detect things your present software cannot, BUT, it may also be a ploy to get you to buy it.
- If its not mentioned, BEFORE downloading, question the developer on whether the software has a built-in "Uninstaller," or if it can safely be un-installed using the "Add/Remove" feature of Windows.
- NEVER ever use the Internet without antivirus software. SPAM is an annoyance its nice to be rid of, but thats all it is. A VIRUS can destroy your computer. It is the greater threat. Up-date weekly if possible.

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