The ECM Software
Buyer's Guide

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Contents

Introduction

Learn what enterprise content management is, why organizations need it and how to procure ECM software for your organization.

What Is Enterprise Content Management?

Enterprise content management (ECM) is a set of tools and strategies used to capture, organize, manage and route information for review and approval. High-performing ECM systems run an organization like a well-oiled machine — ensuring information reaches the right people, in the right place, at the right time.

The features and benefits of an ECM system can be wide-reaching, but at its core, an ECM system is there to securely store content, organize it and streamline business tasks to improve document, record and form processing. Even as technology evolves, leading ECM systems offer the robust and scalable functionality to serve organizations' content management and process needs over time.

The goal of ECM software is to speed up operations by automating key processes, saving time spent locating documents with a searchable, centralized digital repository and being better prepared to meet compliance requirements with robust security controls.

ECM Capabilities: Capture, Manage, Store, Preserve and Deliver

Many judge the effectiveness of an enterprise content management system by its ability
to do the following:

- **Capture:** This involves features used to get content into an ECM system, including basic scanning, optical character recognition, artificial intelligence that identifies documents and tools to import content in bulk.

- **Manage:** In this context, management primarily deals with making content easy to locate for authorized users. Features and functionality that facilitate this include configurable security and access rights to restrict unauthorized access, as well as searchable metadata that enables authorized users to find what they need quickly.

- **Store:** Most ECM Systems will store your organization's content in a centralized repository, but how effective these systems are in protecting information and streamlining data sharing largely depends on their ability to utilize external databases or integrate with other systems.

- **Preserve:** For organizations that are under strict regulations, or simply want to preserve content in case of disaster or wear over time, an ECM system should be capable of assisting in archiving efforts. Functionality may include digitized records scheduling and the ability to work with Write-Once, Read-Many (WORM) storage.

- **Deliver:** An ECM system's ability to deliver is primarily based on whether its users can access the content that they need, when they need it. While baseline ECM functionality enables users to store and retrieve information in a repository like a digital filing cabinet, industry-leading ECM systems are compatible with a variety of devices and feature intuitive client interfaces. These leading systems also enable organizations to leverage transactional content, such as invoices and purchase orders, by building digital workflows or using robotic process automation (RPA) to put information into the right person's hands at the right time.

Use Cases for Enterprise Content Management

Enterprise content management software that features robust functionality, including records management capabilities, business process automation and data analytics, can assist organizations with a wide variety of business challenges:

- **Government offices that go paperless** can more easily find documents to process FOIA and other records requests and in some cases make self-service, automated portals, increasing constituent satisfaction.

- **Accounts payable departments can process paperwork faster,** gathering invoice information quickly with AI-driven smart capture technology, while utilizing reporting features to track and monitor the entire AP process.

- **Rapidly expanding enterprises can sustain growth** with a system that is capable of scaling with the business and offers seamless integrations with other line-of-business applications.

- **Manufacturing firms can keep complex projects moving** with collaboration and search tools, improving interdepartmental communications and vendor relationships.

- **Contract management teams can manage projects and initiatives globally:** Process automation can route important documents for approval to major stakeholders, wherever they are in the world.

- **Educational institutions can keep student records secure** with granular access and other security controls, supporting efforts to reduce risk and meet compliance requirements.

- **Healthcare professionals can locate patient records faster,** enabling them to more promptly assist their patients and get a clearer picture of their health.

- **Finance institutions can more quickly locate and analyze information** from a variety of documents, including clearinghouse reports and transaction records.

- **Human resources departments can reduce manual tasks:** Process automation can assist in eliminating manual data entry and streamlining the flow of information between different systems such as those for recruiting and onboarding.

Chapter 4
Finding the Right System

Finding the ECM system that fits your organization starts with looking at your organization's business processes as they exist, identifying opportunities for digitization, automation and optimization and evaluating the marketplace for systems.

Identifying your organization's needs

Before looking at any system, your organization will want to gather as much information as possible on how it plans to use the proposed enterprise content management system. This includes:

- What types of content your organization plans to store in its system, including emails, videos, audio files or text documents.

- What processes your organization plans to improve with automation.

- If your organization's system needs to be used by one department, a few departments or the entire organization.

- What your organization needs to deploy a new system, including any hardware upgrades or integrations with current systems.

- How many users will have access to the system and what privileges they need.

Conducting research

Before deciding on a system for your organization, be sure to consult resources including analyst reports, customer references and peer-to-peer software review websites. This will enable your organization to gain a clear sense of how each vendor stacks up and how satisfied their customers are.

Also, be sure to look at each vendor's informational materials, including:

- Product pages
- Datasheets
- Videos
- Software trials
- Feature lists
- Blog posts
- Product demos

Consider whether a particular vendor has a specialized field of expertise, or if it's considered a thought leader in its industry. Also note that while some vendors sell their software directly, some also work through a network of software solution providers. If your organization chooses to work with a reseller, also be sure to vet the reseller to ensure that they provide the software and level of service your organization's implementation requires.

Contacting vendors

Once this preliminary research has produced some viable candidates, communicate with stakeholders to decide on which vendors to contact. This can be done via a sales call or through email.

If your organization requires a more formalized buying process, it can also send a request for information (RFI) document that clearly and specifically outlines the capabilities required from a potential vendor.

The most important part here is to ask as many questions as possible. Your organization will want to have complete clarity about pricing, utility, support and more. We will outline the major factors to consider in the next section.

Factors to Consider for Enterprise Content Management Software

When communicating with vendors, whether through RFIs or otherwise, it's important to make it clear what your organization wants from the system. Here are some of the factors to look for when conducting research.

Licensing structures

When choosing enterprise content management software for your organization, it's worth discussing how to license it. Below are a few key considerations:

- **Named vs. concurrent vs. site licensing:** Many of today's software vendors offer one or more of these models.

  Named user licensing, sometimes called "per-seat", is based on how many individual users who have access to the system. Each user is assigned a dedicated license for their use. Its main benefits are allowing your organization to purchase exactly as many licenses as it needs and ensuring that users are never locked out due to license availability. There are often different types of named user licenses that enable varying functionality at different price points. A common example of these types is Full vs Read-Only.

  Concurrent user licensing is based on the maximum number of users who can access the system at the same time. If all licenses in the "pool" are in use, additional users will be unable to access the system until others log off. Its main benefits are in scenarios where a small number of concurrent licenses can serve a large number of infrequent users. The main downsides to concurrent licenses are the need to guess at the maximum number of simultaneous users which can result in either over-purchasing or having users locked out of the system at the busiest times.

Site licensing allows use of the software at a particular site or across an organization. The terms of site licenses can vary and are often negotiated with the vendor based on use case. Some vendors offer site licenses for institutional buyers like cities or colleges with pricing based on factors like city population or number of enrolled students. Large organizations considering a widespread ECM deployment should also investigate this option.

- **Perpetual vs. subscription:** When purchasing software, your organization may have a choice between perpetual and subscription licenses.

  Perpetual licensing offers indefinite use of the purchased software for a large upfront cost and typically is only available for deployment models where your organization hosts the software itself. Vendors continue to provide software updates while your organization has an active support contract.

  Subscription licensing offers the purchased software at a lower cost, but on an ongoing, per month basis. In most cases, the subscription fee includes support coverage. Typically, your organization will also have the option to pay a monthly fee or pre-pay the whole year to receive a discount. Subscription licensing provides greater flexibility and makes it easier to add and remove users as needed.

Software solution providers

Some vendors offer their product exclusively or semi-exclusively through software solution providers, who package hardware, services and/or software together to provide comprehensive solutions for customers. Customers can benefit from local and individualized support when they work with solution providers of ECM vendors that have established, robust reseller programs.

Here are other points your organization should consider when working with a solution provider:

- **Proven experience:** Make sure they know the software and preferably your organization's industry, well enough that they can provide your organization with the resources and knowledge it needs.

- **Comprehensive services:** Your organization will want to make sure that a reseller provides all the services and equipment needed to get the system fully up and running and working as intended.

- **Personalized attention:** The right solution providers will work directly with your organization's IT department to determine the best course of action as far as implementation. It is also important to consider the ease with which solution providers can implement the system your organization selects.

The most robust, user-friendly ECM systems can be deployed and supported by an independent solution provider. Choosing an easy-to-use, easy-to-support system will help ensure that the solution provider can be a one-stop source for all your organization's support needs, while increasing the business value of the ECM system over time.

Deployment models

Some vendors offer multiple options for where to deploy your organization's system. These options fall into two general categories: vendor-hosted and customer-hosted (sometimes called "self-hosted"). '

Vendor-hosted:

- **Software-as-a-service (SaaS):** The vendor hosts the applications and makes them available to your organization over the internet. In this model, the vendor handles the availability, scalability and security of the application infrastructure. SaaS allows your organization to focus on the systems that deliver business value rather than lower-level operational concerns. The vendor is also responsible for applying updates and fixes to the platform, so your organization will always have the latest features and functionality available.

  For these reasons, SaaS has greatly increased in popularity in recent years and the trend shows no sign of slowing. With SaaS, your organization is trusting the vendor with its data, so it is important to verify the service has strong security and privacy controls.

  A good place to start is looking at certifications, such as the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants' Service Organization Controls 2 (SOC 2) certification. Vendors must meet a high standard for security and privacy controls and regularly prove this to auditors to receive such recognition. Having a recent SOC 2 certification is a good measure of the vendor's ability to support your organization's compliance efforts.

  It is also important to have your organization's system available when needed. Look for a vendor that offers a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with at least a 99% and ideally a 99.9% availability guarantee. This financially-backed agreement helps demonstrate the vendor's commitment to providing a reliable service.

A SaaS ECM offering that meets the criteria above as well as your organization's functional requirements is usually the ideal option for today's buyer.

- **Application service provider (ASP):** Either the vendor or one of their solution providers hosts and manages an instance of the "on-prem" software for your organization. They may apply updates to your organization's instance but are unlikely to do so as regularly or as automatically as a SaaS option would.

  If evaluating an ASP option, make sure to ask the vendor or solution provider how they handle applying updates and at what frequency.

  SaaS has largely superseded the ASP model because it allows both vendors and customers to realize the benefits of operating the service at scale.

Customer-hosted:

- **On-premises:** This option requires your organization to install the software in its own data center environment. It offers complete control over hardware, system architecture, data and security at all levels. Some organizations are willing to take on the additional management and cost overhead in exchange for having that level of control.

  Because your organization is running the system, it controls exactly what updates it receives and when. This has both pros and cons. Any change introduces risk, and by controlling changes your organization can manage that risk according to its own policies and tolerances. On the other hand, your organization must manually apply any updates or engage professional services from the solution provider to do so on your organization's behalf. Falling behind on updates can also introduce risk because they often include security fixes and enhancements in addition to functional ones. Take these considerations into account when evaluating the total cost of ownership (TCO) for a given option.

Some organizations also have highly specific compliance requirements, such as the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Systems (CJIS) Security Policy or U.S. International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) that some systems may not accommodate.

Finally, there may be feature differences between a vendor's SaaS and self-hosted software versions that influence how your organization designs its system. If a feature is important to your organization, always check if it is available for your organization's preferred deployment model, and if it is not, ask if it is on the vendor's technology roadmap.

- **Public cloud:** This option is similar to on-premises except your organization installs the software in its own AWS or Azure environment. It allows your organization to hand off responsibility for the lower levels of infrastructure management to the cloud provider. This is especially true if the vendor's software supports using platform-as-a-service (PaaS) options like Azure SQL Database that handle backups and updates automatically. The public cloud providers have highly reliable and scalable infrastructure, though often at a high cost.

  Some vendors provide deployment automation toolkits for the major cloud platforms, sometimes referred to as pre-built server images. These can help your organization get up and running faster and accelerate time-to-value for your organization's system.

Implementation

A smooth implementation process is essential to realizing a return on investment in your organization's expected timeframe. Here are some important implementation characteristics your organization should look for:

- **Configurability:** Enterprise content management systems vary in their configurability. The systems that offer basic and advanced setup options provide flexibility to meet the needs of your business. Basic setups can be fast, but your organization may want an advanced setup's configurability based on what other systems or databases are already in place. The most effective systems will enable your organization to implement advanced functionality with minimal configuration and setup time. In addition to the system itself, your organization will also want to ensure that it is easy to set up user accounts and administer security settings.

- **System requirements:** If your organization is hosting the system, make sure the software supports the platforms your organization's IT department is familiar with, such as Microsoft Windows Server, SQL Server and Active Directory. Existing expertise makes it much easier to deploy and support the system. A good vendor or solution provider should be able to provide server requirements once they understand your organization's use case, content volume and expected number of users. If the system has web-based interfaces, also make sure they support modern web browsers like Chrome, Edge and Firefox.

- **Scalability:** It's important to understand how the system will handle your organization's use cases both today and in the future. There are different dimensions systems can scale along, such as amount and growth rate of content, number of concurrent users and how many processes run each day. For customer-hosted systems, resource scaling is usually described in terms of "vertical" (bigger servers) or "horizontal" (more servers). SaaS options usually automatically handle scaling for your organization behind the scenes.

- **Records management and archiving:** If your organization is a part of or affiliated with heavily regulated industries such as finance, government or healthcare, it may find records management and archival features essential to supporting compliance efforts. A more advanced ECM system provides features to update the status of records, so your organization knows immediately when records are ready for archival or disposition.

- **Process automation:** When using an enterprise content management system, your organization will want to know exactly what it's capable of as far as automating processes. This is why it's important to take a deep dive into the specific actions the system can automate, and if your organization can configure these actions to meet its needs.

Integration capabilities

Most organizations need their enterprise content management software to work with other systems. Your organization will want to make sure the system being assessed works with any software it is using or plans to purchase in the future, and that it has the IT resources to set up, implement and manage any integrations. Here are a few types of integration tools vendors usually offer:

- **Pre-built integrations:** Typically offered by solution providers, a third party or built natively within the software itself, pre-built integrations should only acquire a few details about an external system to integrate with it, and can appear directly within an application's graphical user interface.

- **Code-free tools:** Organizations that rely on legacy systems or external sites for everyday operations, but do not have pre-built integrations, APIs or the resources to code their own systems may have data redundancy or significant manual data entry in their processes. An ECM system that is truly built for organizations to scale will offer low-code or no-code integration tools with drag and drop functionality, and visual workflow designers that can be deployed rapidly, as well as tools that can mimic human behavior with the processing speed and accuracy of software.

- **Application programming interfaces (APIs):** These are commands given to an application with code. If it's not feasible to integrate, your organization's IT department or a solution provider can code custom integrations with APIs to creatively solve any communication issues between systems.

- **Capture tools:** Your organization needs to make sure its system provides technology to capture and digitize its documents, such as invoices and contracts. The capture tools should be able to import documents from a variety of physical and digital sources, such as scanners, emails and network file shares. A more advanced system can gather data from documents using optical character recognition and artificial intelligence, organize documents in the correct folder automatically and even process multiple documents in bulk.

Support

Proper support and training are essential to ensuring user adoption of your organization's new system and its success. Here are some of the prominent types of support to look for when choosing a system:

- **Lab-style training:** Your organization will want to see if its solution provider offers in-person and virtual training or workshops. Virtual training is also an attractive option to provide these resources to the system's users at scale, no matter where they are physically located.

- **User community:** Whether in-person or online, a vibrant community is a powerful resource for users looking to troubleshoot and share their expertise. Your organization will want to see what community resources and events a vendor offers — such as industry conferences, networking opportunities and user groups — when deciding.

- **Online and phone support:** Most vendors should offer phone or online tech support. However, make sure to check the availability of the prospective system's support team, as well as their guaranteed response times, to ensure that they'll be available when the system's users need them.

- **Documentation:** Even systems with the most intuitive interfaces and experiences need documentation. While the best-in-class enterprise content management systems offer a robust set of features, clear and concise learning materials are essential tools for users to get the most out of the product.

Security

Security is critical in today's world — your organization's enterprise content management software should be no exception. These are some characteristics to look for when deciding on a system:

- **Access rights and privileges:** Your organization's system should have configurable access so that users can only edit, add or remove content and processes as authorized by their role. The most sophisticated systems will be able to balance this security with accessibility and transparency.

- **Compliance and certification:** Some industries have particularly strict compliance requirements, such as HIPAA for healthcare and FINRA regulations within the financial sector. Make sure the software your organization chooses has the features needed to meet these requirements and that the vendor has a history of working with highly regulated industries.

Ease-of-use

How quickly users can pick up the software and put it to productive use should be a primary consideration when looking at different systems. The best enterprise content management software offers powerful capabilities with a short learning curve:

- **The user experience:** Your organization needs to be confident that the users will know what actions to take when using the chosen system. Make sure the interface is easy to understand and intuitive. Your organization may even want a specialized experience for new users that walks them through important features to encourage adoption of the new software.

- **Collaboration tools:** Working on documents together should be easy for the users and teams using your organization's system. Part of this includes providing the most up-to-date versions of documents, while also keeping the older versions for reference. To encourage an even faster and more collaborative document editing process, some enterprise content management systems offer coauthoring, allowing multiple users to simultaneously edit the same version of a document.

- **Process templates:** In order to get processes up and running quickly, your organization may want to find a system that offers ready-to-use process templates, preferably with the ability to customize afterwards.

Chapter 6

The Procurement Process

Once your organization knows what to look for, it's time to start thoroughly comparing its options to make the right decision. Read on to discover strategies your organization can use to stay informed at each step in the system procurement process.

Compare and contrast vendors

If your organization sent out RFIs during the research process, look at vendor responses. The relatively formal presentation of RFIs should make the distinctions between available options easy to identify. In situations where RFIs aren't used, internal staff should still conduct thorough assessments of potential vendors that clearly outline their offerings. With this new information, your organization should be able compare the benefits — such as those outlined in previous sections — each vendor offers. Your organization will want to look at criteria such as:

- **Price:** Look at any preliminary or previously researched prices to get a relative idea of how much each system costs compared to its competitors.

- **Utility:** Make sure this system has the features your organization needs and wants.

- **Usability:** Assess whether the software is easy to set up and work with on a daily basis.

- **Security and compliance:** Ensure the systems your organization is considering have the right security measures that enable it to support compliance with any current or upcoming industry regulations.

- **Support:** Clarify that both the vendor and solution provider can help meet your organization's deployment needs as well as provide ongoing support.

For a more detailed analysis of a vendor, your organization may want to schedule a general demo to test the software, gather more information via phone or email, or submit a request for proposal to prospective vendors. RFPs typically include specific systems and packages your organization wants to purchase and are usually created after consulting your organization's internal stakeholders about items to include.

Identifying your organization's top contenders

When your organization starts getting responses to its questions from vendors, use their answers to narrow down the options to a few main contenders. Your organization will want to make sure that the systems it chooses at the contender stage share most, if not all, of the major capabilities your organization wants. Comparing systems with similar options helps to simplify the decision by making key differences much easier to identify.

Scheduling a demonstration

With only a few systems left to decide between, your organization will want to schedule an overview demo with each of these vendors. If your organization has already seen a demonstration earlier in the procurement process, it may want to get a proof-of-concept or trial that allows users to try out the software in real-time — such as a fully featured sandbox environment, or a custom environment that fits your organization's expected use cases.

Making the purchase

Once your organization has a list of options to consider for purchase, it's time to start negotiating price. This includes more than just the base price for the application itself. Many vendors charge per-user, so your organization will want to be careful about balancing its costs with its needs — if your organization doesn't purchase enough user accounts up-front, it may limit scalability, while purchasing too many may make the system unnecessarily expensive. It is important to consider vendors who work with your organization to determine its needs and offer different pricing that can change over time depending on business needs. As mentioned earlier, subscription pricing is often more flexible and makes it easier to adjust your organization's license counts as needed.

On the other hand, some vendors offer steep discounts for large-scale systems compared to smaller-scale ones. Your organization will want to find a balance here to get the largest return on its initial investment. If feeling confident with a decision based on the selected vendor's presentation, it may be worth it to consider what other groups in your organization have use cases that could benefit from the system. Even if they aren't part of the initial deployment, your organization could look forward to future volume discounts and faster rollouts that can build on the existing system. When your organization has final prices for each system, it will want to compare them and understand why one vendor has a lower or higher price than another.

Lastly, consider your organization should consider the time needed to get the new system up and running. A vendor who provides systems that are easily configurable can allow your organization to deploy its system rapidly and realize business value sooner.

Implementation

When your organization finally decides on a system, it's time to start getting value out of the purchase. Here are a few things to keep in mind during implementation.

- **Familiarize system users with the software:** The software your organization procures may likely accomplish tasks in a different manner than previous systems. Be sure to use this change as an opportunity to reevaluate how your organization's processes work. Come up with new best practices that take advantage of the new system, instead of trying to imitate how your organization used its previous system. The solution provider chosen to implement the enterprise content management system can prove to be an invaluable resource in showing your organization how to get the most out of its system by thinking outside the box.

- **Contact support when your organization needs it:** When selecting an ECM vendor and solution provider, consider whether they offer implementation and support packages. Oftentimes, the staff and resources your organization can dedicate to the implementation are limited and it can be beneficial to purchase one of these packages. If your organization does purchase an implementation and support plan, make sure the IT department clearly and regularly communicates with support staff for a smooth implementation.

- **Make an onboarding plan:** It's important that, in addition to your organization's IT department, main stakeholders and users are also familiar with the system. It may be a good idea to set up training programs to help users get accustomed to the new system and ensure that they know how to effectively use it.

- **Come up with a change management strategy:** Even if your organization's users know how to use the software, it will still want to advise and instruct them on how the new system will impact their day-to-day work and existing processes. This can be done through department or company-wide announcements, information sessions, online training or downloadable resources. Also, be sure to roll out your organization's system on a timeline that limits potential disruption, such as a time of year when the system won't be used as frequently.

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