Your Definitive Guide to Merchant Software

Contents

Whether you are a builders' merchant, timber, plumber or other, you are expected to carry a stock holding of an extraordinary range of products as standard.

In addition, you must be capable of sourcing thousands more at the drop of a hat - cement, timber, nuts and bolts, tools, cable, lamps and lighting, plugs and sockets, stoves and lawnmowers, paint and accessories — all available from stock at the time of asking. No small task!

On top of this, you are expected to act as an advisor to the skilled and unskilled on everything from building a tree house to information on the latest range of heating pumps. Indeed, many tradesmen out there rely heavily on the expertise of you and your staff to make correct choices to meet their needs.

When this expertise and relationship translates to a sale, it's imperative your team have ready access to reliable information and the ability to process orders quickly and accurately whilst also protecting your margin. This is where your merchant business software or ERP solution should excel.

The right merchant business management software or ERP solution can have a dramatic and positive impact on your business. To ensure the expertise and customer relationships your team have built are not let down by your systems, you need to understand the various aspects of merchant software that can enable you to optimise your business to deliver the greatest value.

The following will hopefully act as a guide to you if you are reflecting on your current system or looking at future software requirements.

Merchant Software

The Basics

From quotations to order placement to deliveries and collections, it's vital your merchant software has been designed to make this entire process seamless. It must form an integrated system capable of handling multiple sales channels, complex stock control, order processing, customer relationship management, financials and more.

And it is essential that it improves the flow of information across your business and gives everyone access to real-time information. The following are standard capabilities in today's merchant software that shouldn't be compromised.

1. Complete Control of your Merchant Business:

Personalised Workplaces, Security Polices, Audit Trail and Access Control

Technology has moved on from the question of should you go with an 'out-of-the-box' or 'fully bespoke' ERP solution. With the flexibility of .Net technology, it is now standard to quickly and cost-effectively tweak and customise software solutions to suit exact business needs. So accepting an out-of-the-box solution supported by out-of-the-box processes is antiquated.

Every business is unique and your ERP must support not constrain your value proposition. Many businesses fear requesting customisations as there is a misconception that this will create technology lock-ins or will be too costly or even take too long to get changes developed. This isn't the case with modern ERP software. More often than not today's systems are built to support multiple layers of 'code-free' customisations.

This translates to your in-house system administrators been given more autonomy and control to create the system that best suits your individual business nuances: like creating your own workflows and alerts on the fly as well as being able to maintain good housekeeping to retain the integrity of your data.

“Intact iQ is like a piece of plasticine. It can be changed or moulded to how you want to operate. To be able to change any designs or add in new screens and new layouts has been absolutely fantastic”

Paul Pamment, Area General Manager
of CT Bakers Builders Merchants

In any multi user environment, it is also imperative that sensitive information is not made available to the wrong personnel. The ability to lock down information for particular roles and individuals is an absolute requirement. Modern systems must enable you to tailor individual screens so that information relevant to a role is displayed only. And it’s essential that your system allows you to create custom menus for individual staff or for groups of staff, ensuring speedy access to relevant information, alerts & reports.

Additionally, rather than be put on a long list of program changes (should you need any), your consultant should have the ability to make the majority of changes you need, quickly and cost-effectively. This means only very unique customisations need to go into the development process.

Configuration of your system to meet individual nuances and applying end-to-end controls at every level will ensure your software is fully optimised to support how you want to run your business versus moulding your business process to fit a piece of software.

Too often, customers find themselves stuck with an ERP solution that promised to liberate the workforce and drive change, but in fact requires valuable resources to integrate it with other functions, keep it running smoothly, or simply make it work in the worst cases.

This is a once every 8-10 year investment, so invest in a solution that can be adapted and moulded to optimise your business today and over the lifecycle of your solution.

We take a closer look now at just some of the key requirements you shouldn’t compromise on.

Role Based Security Policies

In a multi user environment, it can be tedious to set up and control access for every member of staff accessing the system individually. More flexible and powerful systems will allow you to easily configure access by role and attach this role to individual user accounts. They also allow you to tailor individual user screens and menus to roles or users – it's certainly worth challenging your current or potential systems against these criteria.

Personalised Menu Options & Screens

There is a natural inquisitive trait inside everyone and as such, it is important to expect that users of your computer system will naturally explore all available information. As such, it is vitally important that your core financial and cost information is hidden from prying eyes. Your system should allow the system administrator to provide access to relevant information and functionality for all staff through provision of customised interfaces. This way, it is easy to ensure that all back door access is shut down. But equally important is the fact that screens personalised to individual's roles will make them significantly more productive. With all the controls, KPI data and information they need to do their job accessible on one screen your team will be more efficient and your customers happier.

Dashboards/Control Desks

Most users, admin or management staff will tend to require the same data regularly with updated information. Any modern system should provide this kind of access to key users in a simple dashboard style format. This should be customisable by user or role and contain the vital statistics you wish to monitor whilst enabling further drill down capabilities as required.

Audit Trail

The validity of ALL data in your system is of utmost importance and as such, the ability to identify who, when and why data changed is a core requirement. Interrogating the audit trail is a straightforward task for the system administrator and will ensure any changes made to your system can be fully traced back and monitored.

2. Simplify and Automate your Business Processes:

Workflows, Alerts and Control Desks

Continuous development in technology has greatly improved the flow of information through a business. It is now easier than ever for the right people to receive the right information at the point of decision making. This is achieved through features like predefined triggered alerts, schedule and exception reporting, user-specific dashboards, reports, data drills or pivot tables.

It is important that your system helps you drive business processes and enforces your own business rules and logic. For instance, new customers may need to go through an approval process or you may require purchase orders over a certain value to be passed by a manager. You may want to be alerted when a sales order over a certain value is logged or may want a daily report of unfulfilled sales orders.

Modern systems push this information out to you and provide a user interface that enables you to define the condition you want to be alerted to. For quick and easy micromanaging of your business, this is indispensable.

Some key capabilities for growing merchants include:

Impose Business Rules

This is often a task that forms part of your ERP implementation. You clean up your processes and associated rules and ensure your consultant enforces them in the new system. But what happens when processes and therefore business rules change? Your merchant software shouldn't be a static beast. It should be agile and you should be able to tweak it to accommodate new business and related rules. For example, you may decide that your customer or product setup may require certain fields to be compulsory or every sales order must pass a credit check or certain products cannot be sold to certain customers. Your software should allow your in-house system administrator to easily implement these controls seamlessly into your business.

Control Workflows

You may have a business rule that insists that any PO over a certain value needs approval. Or you may want your sales rep to be alerted when a customer exceeds their credit limits. Every business operates around a certain set of workflows comprised of rules and behaviours. Your computer system should support the enforcement of these rules and behaviours across your organisation and you should be able to manage them with ease.

Desktop, Email and SMS Alerts

Workflow and business rules can be configured in most systems. It is important however that notifications or alerts are created when certain conditions are met (or not met as the case may be) thus keeping you in the know. This alert can take the form of an on-screen message, a message on a user's dashboard or alternatively, an automated email or SMS can keep remote staff informed. This can even extend to customers to make sure the process actually enhances the customers experience with your business. For example, if final approval is given to a large quote, the quotation is generated automatically and sent to the customer via email.

3. Real-time Company Wide Business Intelligence:

Reporting and Analytics

One of the major driving forces encouraging businesses to implement new ERP or business software systems is their inability to get the information they need from their existing systems. Gathering, storing, analysing and accessing [real-time, company-wide information] is critical to your organisations' success.

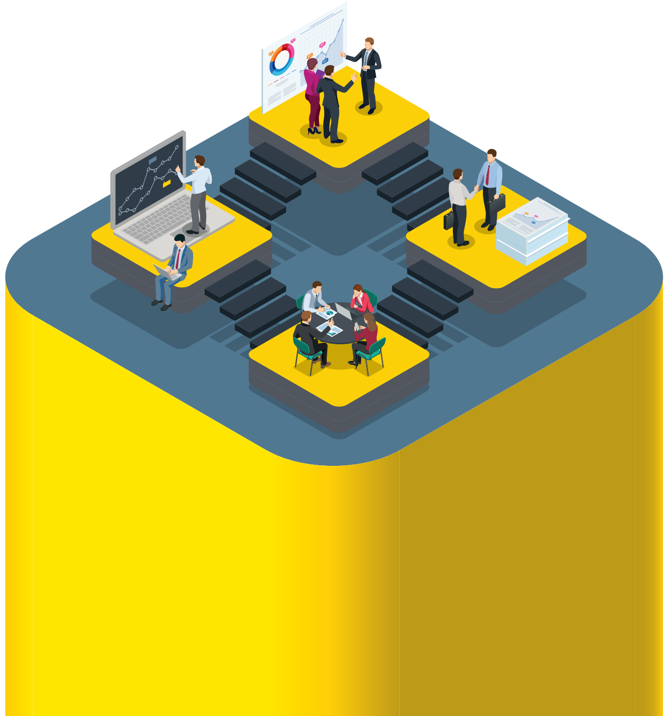
In the ever-changing and complex world of business, survival often depends on your ability to spot a trend, identify an opportunity and quickly capitalise on it. And, regardless of your role, finger-tip access to high-quality and timely data at all times is crucial. In fact, unless you really have to run static reports, you should try to avoid it.

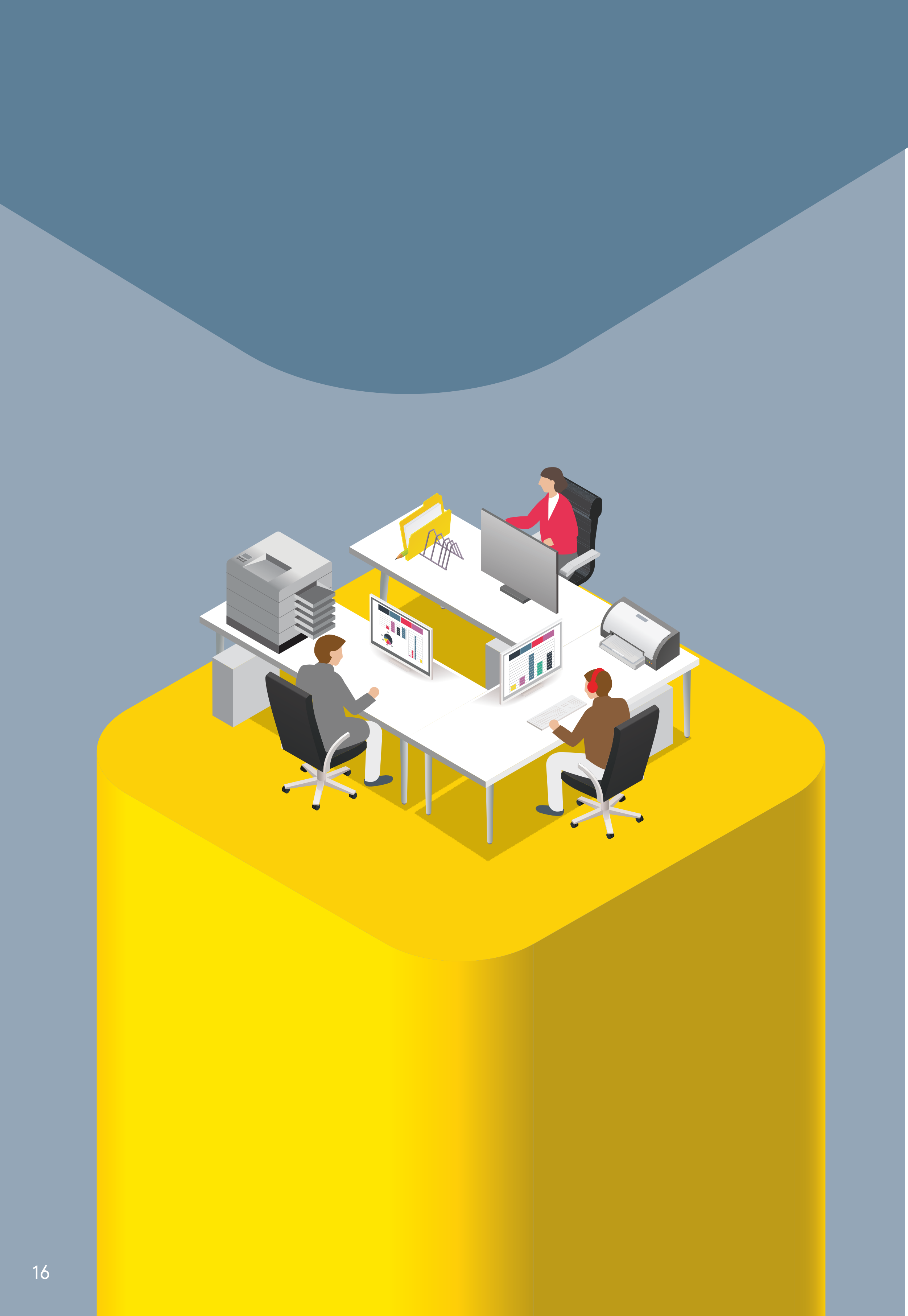
Today, there are an ever-growing array of business intelligence tools available that can analyse your data way beyond anything you might ever need. Most business systems will offer a level of BI as an integrated feature and it is important to exploit all of these opportunities. Challenge your system provider to show you the different layers of analysis you can perform as standard.

And it goes without saying that your BI or analytics tools should be fully integrated with the information housed in your ERP/business software system. Staff armed with real-time information mean less time spent digging for reports from cumbersome menus and more time focusing on sales or providing a superior level of customer service.

Without transparency throughout your enterprise software and a seamless structure connecting all of the reporting functions and departments of your software, you cannot collect all of the mission-critical information your business needs to succeed. Nor can you deliver it to the people who need it, when they need it and in a format they desire.

And if you require more specific data not already housed in your ERP system, you'll need to find out if your system can quickly and easily integrate a 3rd party application that can. Modern merchant software that incorporates industry-standard Rest APIs have made this process much easier and more cost-effective to do.





4. Enhanced Pricing & Margin Controls

It might sound like stating the obvious but control of the end user selling price is the single most important factor in [driving margin for your business](). You know yourself which products you need to have competitively priced and which ones are less sensitive. The ability to make special offers and quantity breaks while ensuring business rules are not broken are a key component to any system.

Some key features to watch out for:

Customer Pricing Lists

Your system needs to be able to handle the wide variety of pricing mechanisms that you have on offer to your customers. The vast majority of systems easily handle price bands and customer specific price lists but in many cases, you need to be able to offer a variety of 'deals' to your customers – category/group discounts, quantity break discounts, fixed price date ranged offers, aggregate discounts, rebates, price matrices etc. You need to have full confidence that your system will honour all your promised prices, rebates and discounts whether the order is entered via an operator, sales rep, website, telesales or tablet.

Special Offers

Depending on the nature of your customer interface – be it trade, retail or online – everyone loves a special offer and it forms a great way of upselling for your sales team. The ability to program your system to offer 'buy one get one free' or similar retail style offers is invaluable. And so too is the ability to have prompts alerting your sales staff of such offers at the point of sale.

Margin Protection and Control

Flexibility can be key to the success of any system. However, too much leeway on areas such as pricing at the point of sale or taking an order can result in a diminishing margin take. The correct system should empower certain staff to offer discounts in a controlled environment and any offers outside of given terms can require authorisation of a supervisor via password control. Proper and effective use of security policies and access controls can result in maximising margin.

Margin Analysis & Reporting

Regular and forensic analysis of your sales and margin will ensure you keep in touch with everything that is happening in your sales environment. Modern ERP systems should deliver this information to you in a timely and accurate manner. It should also enable you to drill down to the entry level to find out the necessary information. You need to insist on data drilling, pivot table and graphical representation to allow you to quickly identify transactions which do not meet your required parameters. You may also wish to be alerted to certain circumstances more immediately – e.g. if sales rep A sells any item with less than X% margin, please send an immediate SMS to my phone – a bit extreme maybe – but that's for you to decide – not your system!

5. Integrated Accounts

Real-time integration is paramount throughout your system

The 'financials' are at the heart of any modern ERP system and real-time general ledger posting is paramount throughout the system. It may not be the most dynamic department in the business but cash is king. Taking care of the finances and providing up to date management information is an integral part of any well run business and you should not compromise on this functionality.

The ability to produce actual verses budget reports on the general ledger may be a vital ingredient in a growing business and should not be overlooked. Profitability and cost centre reporting by branch is an important factor in multi-site businesses and should not involve a plethora of Excel sheets to accomplish. Cash and bank reconciliation are tasks that should be easily facilitated by members of the accounts department with a strong credit control system driven process.

And when you have a business management software system with fully integrated accounts, the efficiencies are actually gained by how the other areas of the business interacts with the accounts. It's also about applying end-to-end business controls. About making the decisions that are right for your company and the fact that the system, no matter what area you're in has the ability to apply your controls and work for you.

6. Regulatory Compliance as Standard:

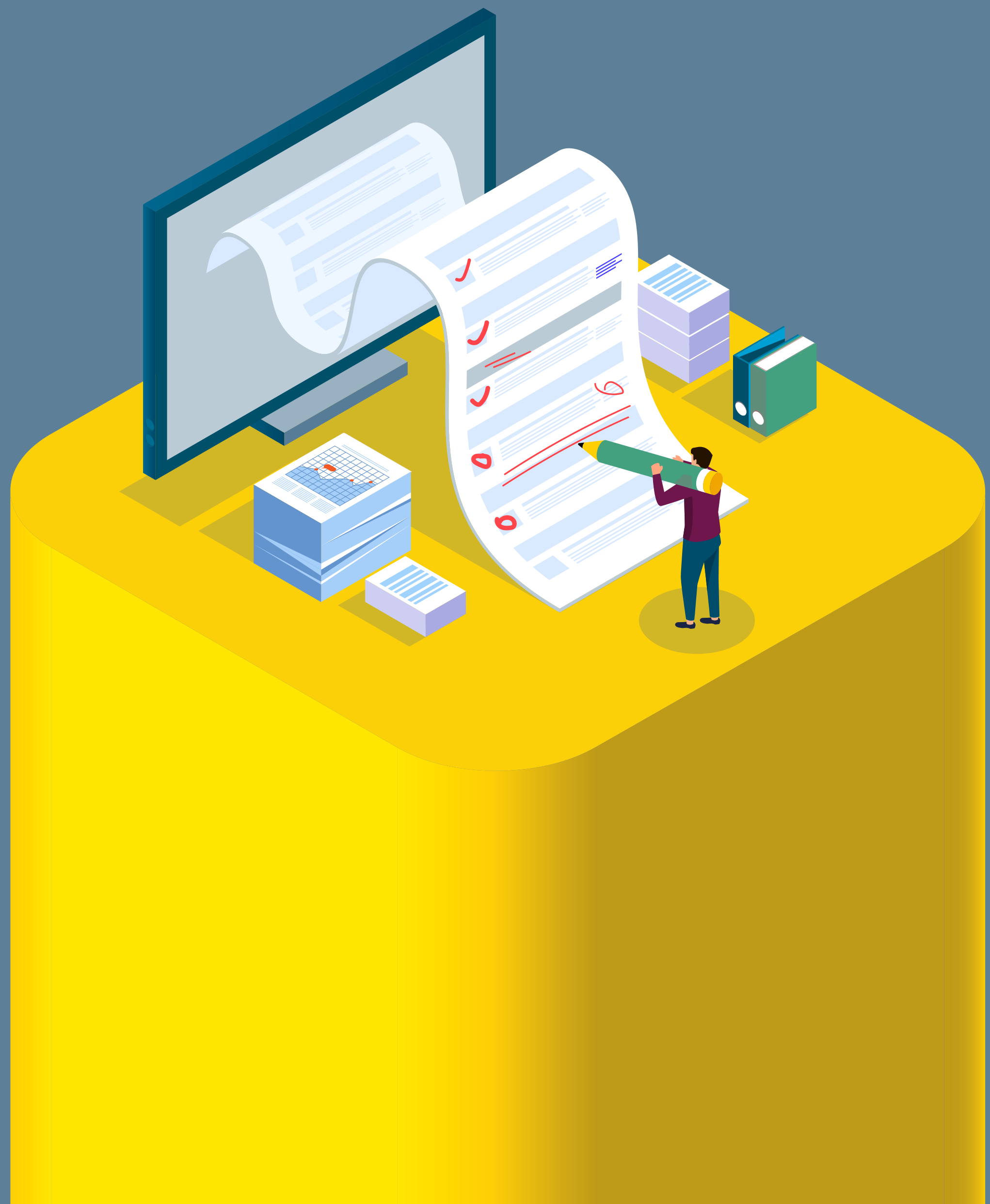
GDPR, MTD and any future requirements

Regulatory compliance is a growing concern for any regulated industry, and as the number of regulations and standards increase, you need an ERP system that can address this ever evolving environment.

From tracing products and providing health and safety information to conforming to GDPR and Making Tax Digital (MTD) regulations, your ERP system must facilitate control over all your documentation, reporting and processes.

A key function of any valuable ERP system is its ability to comply with various quality standards or industry-specific legislation. Unfortunately for legacy ERP users, new regulatory compliance requirements often incur additional charges from software providers or worse, cannot be implemented due to outdated technology. Bolt-on solutions are often added but rarely offer a totally seamlessly integration with your core software.

A key requirement for any ERP system you choose should be its ability to continuously adapt to new quality standards and/or legislations. And more importantly, your ERP vendor to provide these without you incurring additional charges.



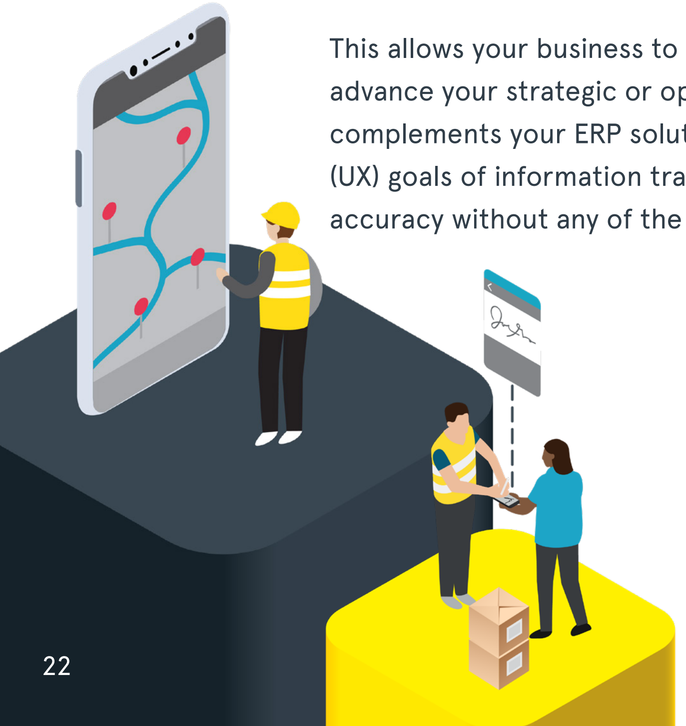
7. Third Party Solutions

Running your entire business via your ERP system alone is easily achievable thanks to modern ERP solutions that include fully integrated business intelligence, CRM and industry-specific functionality etc.

However, if your business requires a 'best-of-breed' application to run a certain element of your business, you shouldn't have to compromise your goal of operating with one source of the truth.

Integrating 3rd party applications with modern ERP solutions is now easier than ever. RESTful API technology facilitates integration projects quicker and much more cost effectively than ever before.

This allows your business to access niche solutions that advance your strategic or operational objectives in a way that complements your ERP solution. You retain user experience (UX) goals of information transparency, collaboration and data accuracy without any of the compromises.



8. Technology/ Infrastructure Options

Your merchant software solution will consist of dozens of connected applications, databases, modules, APIs, etc. This is often referred to as the 'Tech Stack' or 'Technology Stack'. Together they form the engine used to power your ERP solution, performing numerous functions.

While it is not essential to know or understand the tech makeup of your chosen ERP system, it is vital that it is built on modern technologies. This will ensure it can be easily adapted to your industry/business needs and provide a robust and future-led ecosystem to form the backbone of your business; today & long-term.

Your business software must also be accessible to all staff at all times; whether they operate remotely, at the trade counter or in the office. The user experience for every staff member should be seamless and fast. For some businesses this will mean the software they use to run their business operates from an on-premise server.   For others, with strong broadband connections, accessing the software via a native cloud solution may not only be more cost effective but also enhance the users experience.

The key point here is that your chosen software vendor should have the in-house expertise and supporting solutions to guide you on the best infrastructure for your business and support you on your journey to get there.

Merchant Software

Must-Have Features and Functionality

There are a range of specific features that ONLY apply to your industry. It is extremely important therefore to ensure your system supports these capabilities because relying on handwritten notes or spreadsheets won't cut it anymore. These features should form a core element of your assessment or evaluation process as they provide invaluable controls in your business.

It is also worth noting that software providers within your industry generally have a greater understanding of your requirements and the wherewithal to adequately address them.

1. EPOS point of sale:
The Trade Counter

Where you have a mixture of trade, retail and wholesale, a fully integrated EPOS system is essential. It needs to take into consideration the important role that cost, margins, stock and customer service play in your supply chain. And it must fully integrate everything you need from quotations, returns, batch stock management, rebates and order placement to deliveries and collections.

The level of customer service in a trade counter environment is critical for any merchant seeking to create a good first impression, drive repeat business and foster long-term relationships with your customers.

In order to maximise sales and profitability, it is imperative that the trade counter operation is fast, efficient and reliable.

The reality is that valuable time often gets wasted at the trade counter. Staff shortages, manually having to check stock levels or even manual processes that lead to more paperwork can be the cause of this.

Ensuring a smooth flow of information and access to real-time data, an integrated EPOS system must be able to handle multiple sales channels, complex stock control, order processing, customer relationship management, financials and more. Here are our top 31 EPOS features (covered over 3 blogs)

"Before it would take a good 30 minutes to scroll through the products, whereas now in Intact iQ you can pick specific words out and find that product within seconds"

Lee Shepard, Sales Coordinator, PC Building Supplies

2. Rebate Management

Most modern ERP systems have the capability to manage simple rebate agreements. But many wholesalers, distributors, merchants and buying groups negotiate complex agreements that need to be accommodated by your core ERP software. As rebates are such a huge part of any merchant business, rebate management is crucial and yet many have found it a challenge.

Your business software should be in a position to cope with complex rules or even bring in group results to give a more realistic rebate value. And once you have traceability of this key data then rebate management comes into play. This involves easy tracking of progress, pro-active notification of rebates due and where threshold boundaries are close. The administrative savings here are huge if effective rebate management is alive and well in your business.

Some features to look out for might include;

- Potential rebates calculated on every purchase order and delivery line.
- Audit trail for full historical traceability of every rebate due from every transaction line.
- Automatic rebate accrual to your General ledger
- Rebate recalculation when thresholds are crossed.

This level of visibility and control ensures rebate terms are fully adhered to minimising profit leakage or rebate disputes.

3. Product Specific Attributes

Timber Sales

For those merchants selling timber, many choose different methods of pricing, selling and stocking of timber. You may:

- Stock in cubic meters, meters or lengths
- Price per meter, cubic meter, length, per 100m
- Sell using Timber Tally – a mechanism for totalling sales of similar product of differing lengths.

Whatever your personal choice, your system must be able to support it.

Multiple Selling Unit Options

In handling a wide range of products, it is important your system also enables you to sell the same product in different quantities. For example:

- Tonnes / bags / pallets of cement
- Tonnes / bags of coal
- Units / boxes of nails and screws
- Range of paints in different colours
- Timber (as above)
- Tiles in cartons, individual or per meter
- Batches

Kits & Assembly

Where you offer suites of products for a single price, such as a bathroom section of a hardware store, it is essential to be in control of the margin and price that is offered to the customer. Through clever use of a kit or assembly, you should be confident that your staff will achieve the required margin on each sale.

4. Merchant Ecommerce & Trading Online Options

Bringing sales in 24/7 via eCommerce and customer account platforms is now seen as a core requirement for any merchant. Expanding your business to accommodate web sales will require integration with your software system providing accurate account, pricing and stock information on the web. This is an important step in the lifecycle of any business and should be given the attention and budget that such a step deserves.

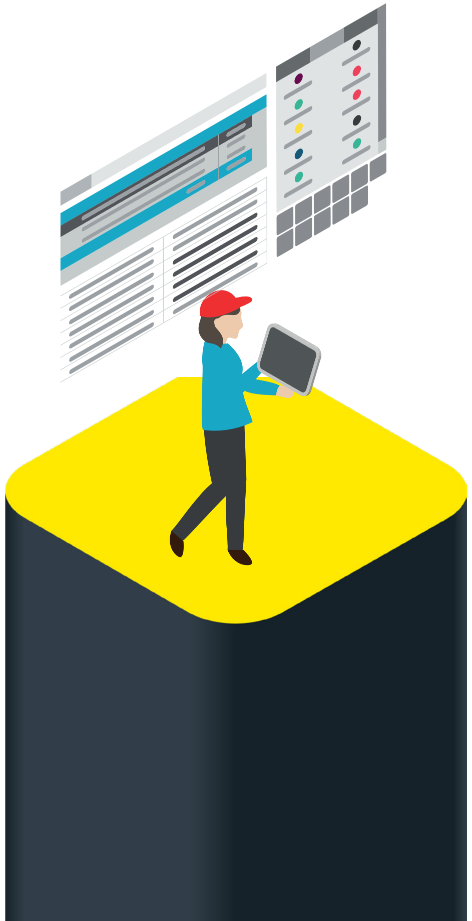
Your customers should also be able to check their account, view previous orders, place new orders and get their special pricing on your e-commerce site with data synced from and to your business software in real time. Your online customer orders should appear automatically in your system ready for picking.

While a web presence is important, it doesn't necessarily have to go as far as a full-blown B2B or B2C ecommerce site. Instead you could opt just to provide your customers with access to their account online via a customer account management portal. Here they can access quotes, invoices, statements and pay their bill online. Or you could extend this functionality to also include repeat ordering for your b2b customers. This is a quick and easy way to get your business online without managing the complexities of a full ecommerce webshop.

An important point here is that traditionally, e-commerce or e-account management were separate solutions. But the world has moved on and we now see merchant software that extends out to these digital platforms in a truly holistic manner.

Merchant software providers now offer native e-commerce, mobile and e-account management platforms. These are designed and built to fully connect with your core business software solution.

They provide you with an all-inclusive offering that supports your ambition to offer customers the same great experience be it at the trade counter, over the phone, online or via a mobile device.



5. Mobile ERP Applications

The mobile revolution has changed the way organisations work, manage their operations, and engage with their employees.

Smartphones and tablets have dramatically changed how your employees and customers behave. With access to resources available at only a few taps, more and more people are using their mobile devices to check information or carry out tasks previously done via their laptop.

Today it's about giving your employees access to the real-time system information and controls they need anytime, anywhere. These apps work an all mobile platforms and can also be tailored by user; turning them into personalised mobile work tools for your employees.

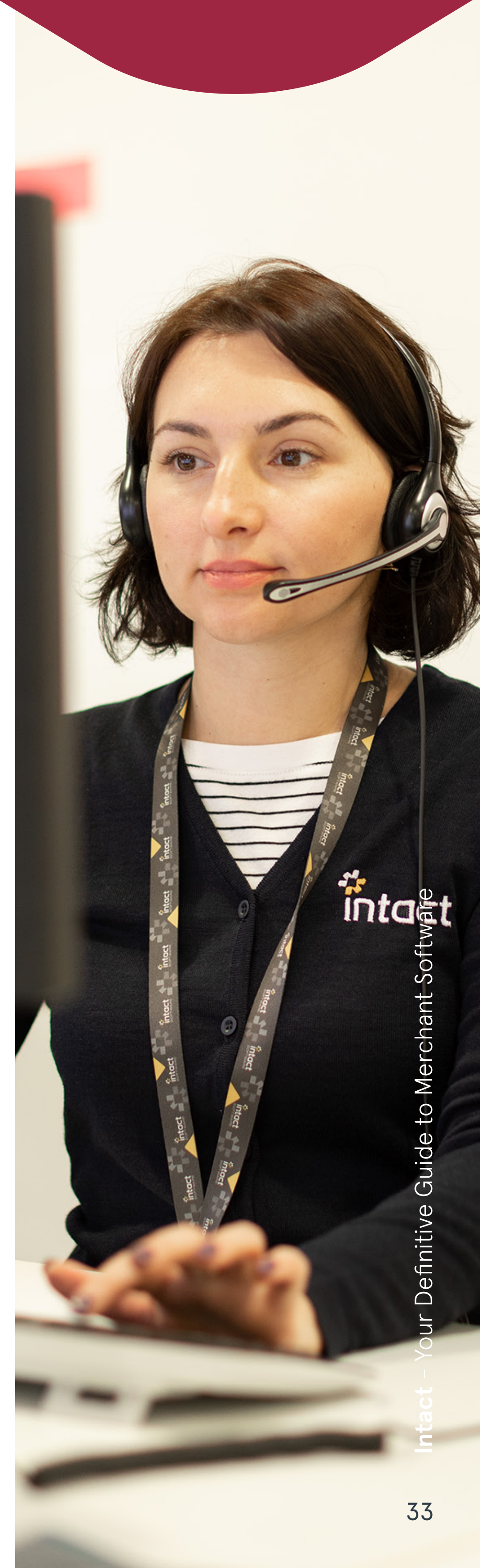
Some examples might include:

- Your delivery team may want to use POD signature/ photo capture feature and post signed delivery dockets back to your system instantly
- Your sales reps may wish to access customer, product or business information at a glance and send CRM updates back your system
- Your management team may wish to see real-time or commercial information

It's all about mobilising your data, your way.

Not many companies are currently enabling their employees to interact with their business software effectively via mobile devices. Delivering an appropriate mobile solution for your employees, therefore, offers a great point of differentiation from your competitors.

It's important to deal with a merchant software vendor that offers fully integrated enterprise mobility solutions as standard. They will start by defining the business problem(s) that can be best solved via a mobile solution. From there they can suggest the best apps to ensure your staff have 24/7 access to the business information and controls they need to maximise their efficiency. And where necessary, tweak them to your particular requirements.



6. Digital Fleet

Clipboards with delivery orders are a common sight in merchant yards. Modern merchant software is making this paper based way of working a thing of the past. Your deliveries can now be scheduled in your system and sent automatically to your drivers' mobile devices along with any supporting documentation. All vehicles and related deliveries will be tracked in real-time with corresponding tracking links sent to your customers.

This functionality will allow you to plan journeys quickly and efficiently;

- Using drag and drop functionality to manually create journeys based on orders (right down to line level), related capacity, location etc. or
- Auto allocate routes based on customer preference, standard routes, postcodes etc. or
- Create a journey at the point of sale where your trade counter staff have access to a booking calendar to book in the delivery with the customer at the point of purchase.

7. Job Costing

If you're a merchant who runs a contract element to your operations, then it is vitally important that you track the progress of individual projects from a financial perspective.

Complex and dynamic, with ever-changing conditions and fluctuating costs, it's a constant challenge to know, in real-time, which projects are running to budget and which are not. Costs can accrue from many different sources and it is important that each of these are clearly identified within the job.

A true job costing system must go beyond just capturing income and expenses. It needs to provide accurate and timely information about jobs in progress.

From simple job tracking to extremely complex requirements, your business software should enable you to maximise your resources and tightly control each job. Some job costing features to look out for might include; incorporates product pricing, non-stocked/text items, labour costs, job costing, job profitability, customer relations, full credit control, live P & L, live WIP (work in progress) and accounts – to name just a few.

Today, merchants utilizing fully integrated job costing systems are the one's gaining the most advantage over their competitors. They're streamlining their entire accounting process, eliminating the need for multiple data entry and reducing errors.

So if micromanaging every aspect of your jobs and projects is vital to your business, a fully integrated job costing module is essential in enabling you to control everything from quotes to budget right through to profitability analysis and variance reporting.

Merchant Software

An Enterprise-wide ERP Solution

When it comes to running an effective and efficient merchant business, it's vital your software supports and understands the functions and roles of the following business units:

- **Sales/Trade Counter**
- **Purchasing and Stock Management**
- **Distribution, Warehouse and Branch Network**
- **Sales and Marketing**

We will now proceed through each one in more depth to highlight how merchant software can get each department operating at its best.

Merchant Business Unit: Sales/Trade Counter

From a sales point of view, you need a system that ensures no barriers to trade. It needs to empower your users to do their job with all the relevant, real-time information to hand. And to enable them to quickly and easily process a transaction and make on the spot decisions.

A system where information, controls and processes can be configured and controlled at company, role and user level is imperative here. And within that you should be able to have tiered levels of control (which are not always available in some systems). For instance, you may want your trade counter operator able to give a maximum of 5% discount but your trade counter manager to give up to 25%.

In the event that a user tries to exceed the level of discount from a margin protection point of view, some systems will allow managers to utilise a price negotiation tool. Trade counter staff may still have the ability to negotiate but perhaps not to the same degree, protecting your margin at all times.

Within Intact iQ for instance, when a manager logs in to accept a discount level requested by a user, the level of detail that manager gets in front of him/her will enable them to base their decision on what level of discount is acceptable.

They will see what they're selling it for, the discount, what the net price is, the cost, margin on the product, the variance from the original margin etc. He/She can even see the price history for the product, competitor pricing and rebate information. By giving access to all this information and the net, net price, the manager might approve a certain price knowing you're still getting an acceptable margin.

Your sales staff can still negotiate on price and automatically calculate the discount across a product or across multiple transaction lines. They may also apportion the discount evenly net quantity, ensure adequate margin on each transaction line and mark-up each transaction line.

From within your trade counter screen, it's the level of information available that will facilitate on-the-spot qualified decisions with real-time info. It should also enable you to handle and process a transaction from end-to-end within the user interface; no matter which product you're selling or what product nuances that product has or customer has e.g. returns, rebates, special pricing etc.

And for continuity of layout, your sales order screen should look the same so if you're confident in processing a sales order in the trade counter then you should be competent in processing a sales order on the system. This is particularly useful if a staff member is off sick and you have to move your sales team to accommodate.

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XXX, Head of IT, Clondalkin Builders' Providers

Other key elements for your trade counter and sales team include;

Stock visibility

You need to give your staff access to up to date and accurate stock levels across your entire business. Smart searching and filtering capabilities are a pre-requisite so that time is not spent wading through thousands of codes to find the required one. Once accessed, each user should be able to quickly view the stock across the entire business even if it is in a different branch. Such access and information ensures your business does not carry too much stock when it is available somewhere else in the business. Cash that would otherwise be tied up in your warehouse, can now be used to greater effect in other parts of your business.

When viewing a stock item, your system should be capable of showing the in-stock, on-order, reserved, available (free stock) and effective stock figures in each of the branches without having to search for the information. Such functionality may not be available in every system but it is worth challenging your own system to see if this is functionality you require.

Order Entry

Line level transaction type or processing method capabilities will enable you at the trade counter to select collect now, delivered, direct order, quotation or credit note. But of paramount importance at your trade counter is to facilitate all of this quickly. This is where rapid order entry features should be standard in any merchant software solution. Reducing the number of steps in the process, access to all the controls and information you need from the order entry screen, quick and easy search capabilities; it's these elements that will deliver a frictionless trade counter experience for your customers, every time!

Pricing

From a pricing perspective, your system needs to handle pricing from the simplest format of pointing a company to a price index to the most detailed variations that you would have based on everything from class, group, category down to product level.

This can include various permutations such as quantity discount breaks, factoring in customer rebates and giving you viability of the potential rebate that a customer could have. And you should be able to set different promotions to have everything with timed criteria on it.

End to End Order Management

From quote to sales order, to creating a pick note, delivery and invoice, everything should be managed in your merchant software. Modern ERP systems software can take the data from a pick note, apply it to the transport scheduler to create delivery routes and send the invoice via email to the customer. And then on delivery, signatures or photos can be captured on a mobile ERP app with data held or fed back into your system each step of the way.

In a nutshell, your system must provide your sales/trade counter team with immediate access to accurate information, control of pricing and margin and visibility of stocking levels. And your system should help you eradicate a culture where people need to speak to certain individuals for information, discount assistance etc.

Merchant Business Unit: Purchasing and Stock

Your purchasing and stock team is focused on ensuring you carry the correct stock and the right quantity of each and need ready-access to stock required in line with your delivery guarantees.

Your system should support your efforts to keep accurate and efficient stock levels and it is important that your own housekeeping and processes are supported in your software system. There are so many elements to making a success of this onerous task and your computer system should not be a barrier to implementing them. They include:

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XXX, Head of IT, Clondalkin Builders’ Providers

Stock Take / Checking and Mobile Warehouse

The process of checking your stock should be supported by your computer system and may entail rolling or annual stock check processes. Given the technology available today, there is no reason for not having a continuous stock checking process in place that reflects back into your general ledger. If you have multiple warehouses or branches, you will need to ensure stock checks are carried out against the location in which you are operating. Through accurate stock levels, you can enjoy a host of other related benefits in purchasing and sales. It is such an important part of the jigsaw.

“With Intact iQ, we’ve reduced our stock take times to a 9 or 10-hour procedure where once it was a 3-day ordeal”

Dwayne Hold, Head of IT, Clondalkin Builders’ Providers

With the introduction of mobile devices into your warehouse, the time taken to count and update your system can be greatly reduced resulting in a more efficient process.

Replenishment Rules

With so much historical data in your system and with new forecasting functionality now available in modern merchant software, it should be possible to accurately derive your potential stock requirements from your computer system. Through effective re-calculation of the minimum, re-order and maximum stock levels the system can support the purchasing process by suggesting items to be ordered. Forecasting tools such as those in Intact iQ analyse your data in detail, reviews the seasonality of products etc. and works out the history of sales and any trends/data patterns so you can buy better for the future.

Damaged / Returned Stock

Every business receives its fair share of stock which is not fit for sale or rejected by the customer. Proper management of this stock ensures that the suppliers take their share of the cost for damaged or returned items.

By implementing a proper Returned Merchandise Authorisation (RMA) process and `credit request' processes, you can ensure that any stock that is on your premises is part of a process. Too often, stock that is not fit for sale can sit in a corner of a warehouse awaiting attention without any prompt from the computer system to deal with it. Through careful implementation of workflow rules and alerts, you can ensure that no stock remains unaccounted for in the branch or warehouse for any length of time.

Product Information

From a stock management point of view, your system must be able to handle all the different product types – anything from stocking timber to tally to cube. And if buying in cube and selling it out in metres or 100 metres, your system must accommodate this. If selling things like PPE or work-wear, you'll need index products. In the merchant industry, it's especially important to also be able to extend the product with additional information such as health and safety features. And to be able to automatically email your customers with this information as soon as an order has been saved.

Decision Making

The employees working in the purchasing and stock management side of your business may never actually physically engage with the product or even touch the product. What they need is a control desk featuring all the information they require to make effective buying decisions. For instance, the sales office put up a requisition so your purchasing team needs to decide if they want to amalgamate all the POs into one or multiple purchase orders. Suggested purchase orders will be supplied by the software solution along with forecast quantities to facilitate optimum ordering and stock management.

Outside of the ordering side of things, your purchasing team may also need ready access to container management functionality, shipping lists, import costings, delivery notes etc.

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Merchant Business Unit: Distribution, Warehouse & Branch Network

Your warehouse team are managing the tricky job of keeping track of thousands of products in your warehouse(s). They’re also tasked with optimizing warehouse space and meeting tight delivery turnaround times with desired 100% accuracy. All of these tasks involve numerous variables that need to be effectively managed and often juggled.

Your system must enable you to fully optimise your supply chain processes to help minimise human error, theft, reduce delivery lead times and increase customer satisfaction levels. It should provide your team with access to real-time stock information, analytics and smart stock controls to ensure they can retain optimum control of your stock from the point of order to the point of dispatch.

It needs to be tailored to the guys who are hands on and getting the product out the door. For instance, within Intact iQ, we’ve divided this section into Pickers, Pick Station, Stock Locations & Stock bins. But we’ve also 3 types of pick notes that can be automatically generated – i.e. Pick Note Creator, Manual Pick Notes and Automated Created Pick Notes.

Your warehouse team should know exactly what’s going out the door and what’s being delivered at any point in time. They should be readily able to move from picking to creating a delivery note that’s going on the vehicle to then taking that delivery note and creating the related invoice on the spot.

Inter-Branch Transfers

If you are operating a multi-branch environment, it is important that your system properly supports the required processes. Individual branch stock requirements, inter branch requests and transfers must be fully supported, visible and secure; ensuring efficient and accurate stock throughout. You should enjoy an auditable process which ensures the various stakeholders take responsibility for the stock levels in their branch. The central distribution depot should receive stock requests from the branch automatically and the goods should be picked and dispatched in the normal fashion. Goods leaving the warehouse should enter an 'in-transit' stage and should be subject to a full goods received process at the receiving end.

"With Intact iQ, I can see straight away how each of the 3 depots are doing and the reports can be customised for me as a business owner, and for the CFO and then for the GM's in each site also".

Emma Maye, Owner, Clondalkin Buiders

With full visibility of stock between branches and efficient processes for requesting and dispatching stock, goods can be moved from one branch to the other easily and with full traceability (even when in transit).

As we deal with a lot of multi-branch merchants the ability to monitor interactions across the branch network is imperative e.g. your sales team should have full visibility of stock across your branch network, process branch transfers, dispatch from another branch etc. This is an integral part of a modern merchant ERP system.

Merchant Business Unit: Sales and Marketing

Your sales and marketing business unit should be supported by a fully integrated CRM module that will enable your staff to better serve your customers. It needs to open up vital channels of communication, improve the flow and quality of information and help you build value while enabling you to share client-specific knowledge company-wide.

Right throughout your system, your CRM system should record all interactions across customer, supplier, leads, prospects and all related marketing campaigns.

And your CRM should be something that breeds workflow, points of direction and actively achieves results.

Quotes are synonymous with builders' merchants. But a quote isn't worth the paper it's written on if not followed up. Your systems must have the mechanisms in place to set a quote review date, prompt the user of their quotes requirement review, feed into a sales funnel so you can measure the levels of quotations that you've out etc.

This will enable you to see the forecast on the horizon of the level of business you can anticipate doing. You're not going to get 100% of the business but the tighter you manage this the better the workflow generated by the system. The more pro-active you are here and the more controls you have in place the easier it is to take the initiative and deal with more companies with less stress.

Fully integrated CRM must enable you to categorise, segment, record various different attributes as to how you'd profile your customer base. Going forward you can do proactive targeting and marketing and ensure the right people are receiving the right message – whether a sales message, moved office, special offer on or a 50-year celebration.

As part of your CRM, you may also have marketing tools that allow you to do campaigns, set up mailshots, be it by text, letter or email. With more and more businesses embracing digital, this is something that will increase in importance.

How we communicate is changing and evolving. If you embrace it, it allows you to open up the market place and be in people's line of sight in a more regular and controlled fashion.

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Merchant Software

In Conclusion

Whether you call it business software, an ERP system, accounts system or business management system, it is vitally important that you take the time to choose a future fit-for-purpose solution for your business. The cost of operating and maintaining the wrong system can greatly outweigh the initial investment.

Your system needs to work for you around the clock delivering information, process management and exception reporting. You should feel that you are in a position to micromanage your business through careful identification of key information and indicators. You should be able to choose how, where and when you consume this information and feel in control regardless of where you are located or whether you are connected to your system or not.

Take your time – choose wisely!

The Intact Software Difference

Elevate your business with our perfect-fit merchant ERP software.

Intact deliver perfect fit ERP and business management software solutions that elevate your business. Intact iQ is our end-to-end ERP solution based on new technology; developed and supported in Ireland and the UK.

Designed for today's digital economy, Intact iQ supports every level of your business and extends seamlessly to mobile and online with the capability to extend further to niche third party solutions through our RestAPI. With our native e-commerce, mobile, e-account management and unique agility toolkit, you get the system you need today, robust enough to grow and flex to future needs. Our rich history in the merchant industry ensures common challenges are addressed and best practice processes are endorsed so you can always operate at your best.

Get started at
intactsoftware.com

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