3 Keys to Choosing an
ECM Solution for Government

In today's economy, government officials must develop new, effective ways to serve constituents with reduced budgets and staff. By implementing an enterprise content management (ECM) system, government offices automate business processes, speeding up and improving constituent services.

To get the most value from your ECM purchase, it's important you identify your business needs, research various ECM products and analyze potential vendors. Use this piece as a guide to assist you in developing your ECM solution.

1: Determine Your Business Needs

One of the first steps in selecting an ECM solution is identifying your organization's needs and doing some research to see what ECM solutions might be a fit. To get started:

Identify your biggest inefficiencies: Look for bottlenecks that slow down processes. Many ECM users begin by identifying processes that can be electronically streamlined. Finding ways to automate processes reduces paper usage while increasing transparency into government processes.

Research ECM best practices: Analyst research firms like Gartner and Forrester provide valuable insight about making the right IT investments for your organization. You can speak directly with consultants or gather information through webinars, blogs, seminars, research reports and surveys. Additional information is also available from ECM thought leaders like AIIM.org, blogs and vendor websites.

Talk with peers: By soliciting recommendations from other government entities and talking to peers using ECM, you often get a much better perspective on how a system will function in a real-world scenario. Ask vendors for references and look at the client lists on their websites and call a few organizations similar to yours.

2: Examine Your Options

Once you've identified your business needs and reviewed best practices, it's time to research vendors' products. When doing so, make sure you:

Be specific: Be specific on your requests for proposals/information and scrutinize the answers. Ask for a demonstration. A strong vendor will be able to show you how their solution will work in your organization and improve processes that you use every day.

Ask the right questions: You need to know that you're getting value for your investment. When evaluating an ECM product, ask the following questions:

- Will my investment yield a return today (with known needs) as well as tomorrow (where needs are unknown)?
- Does the product offer flexible deployment options, both on-premise and in the cloud?
- How much custom coding is required? What are the costs associated with it?
- Can the ECM solution scale to accommodate multiple offices and locations?
- Will the ECM solution integrate with existing line-of-business applications?
- If you're implementing a departmental solution, are you paying for an entire enterprise software suite you're not going to use?

These questions are not all-encompassing, but the answers will offer a clear picture of a product's capabilities and how well it will meet your needs.

Plan for the future: The right solution will have the ability to expand beyond your immediate needs and become a government standard. For example, if you're looking for a system to speed up response times for public records requests, it should also have the ability to add value to other departments like finance and administration, health and human services, justice and public safety, and planning and public works. If it can't scale to meet the needs of the entire government enterprise, it could become a one-off technology used in a single department that can't communicate with the other core technologies you use every day.

3: Research Specific Vendors

After examining your options, the next key is to analyze each vendor. You want a company that will be there for you from initial deployment throughout the life of your solution. Look for a company that:

Won't sell and run: Since governments operate on a limited budget, it's important your ECM investment improves your business processes and constituent services. With a true partner – one that provides 24/7 tech support and offers continuous training and certification options – you'll get the most from your technology investment.

Knows government processes: Making sure the vendor knows your industry is equally as important as having deep ECM expertise. If a vendor doesn't know government and the challenges you regularly face, you could add time and money to your purchase, implementation, deployment and upgrade processes.

Meets your needs now and in the future: When purchasing an ECM solution, value must be based not only on what it takes to get the solution in the door, but what it will take to make sure the solution provides long-term value. Your ECM solution should be flexible enough to extend into other government departments and offices as time and budget permit.

Will be there in the long run: Choosing a long-term vendor means it's a financially stable company that devotes a substantial amount of time to its product. An ECM vendor must provide new functionality annually and create ways to consistently hear from its customers.

With these three key research areas covered, you've determined your business needs, researched ECM solutions and analyzed the vendors. You're armed with the right knowledge to make a smart choice. All that's left is the decision.

Now What?

With these three research areas covered, you've determined your business needs, researched ECM solutions and analyzed the vendors. Now, it's time to identify how your organization will benefit from an ECM system. Questions to consider include:

- What's the risk if you don't address your business needs?
- How much does it cost?
- Will training be easy for employees?
- How will it impact your infrastructure?
- Is this a long-term or short-term solution?

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