

Is Your Health System Ready for an Integrated Applications Platform?



In this article, we look at the potential benefits to a health care organization of using an integrated applications platform versus those from multiple vendors. We also describe a process your organization can use when deciding whether to migrate from a multi-vendor system to a single vendor platform.

Health care administration and delivery is challenging enough without adding to its complexity. Yet that's what many health care organizations unwittingly do when they rely on several application platforms instead of using a single vendor's application.

While some specialty software solutions may offer more features and functionality than those of a single vendor, it often comes at a substantial internal cost. Purchasing and licensing expenses for multiple systems can easily stack up, not to mention staff time for managing vendor relationships and coordinating system implementation, training and servicing.

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Single-Vendor Benefits

In recent years, the functionality and quality of single-vendor applications has significantly improved, increasing

their appeal to health care systems of all types and sizes. Consider these typical benefits of a single-vendor application:

1. **Across-the-board workflow speed** – With a single system, users don't have to flip between different systems which may or may not be integrated, increasing overall workflow speed.
2. **Faster procurement and follow-up** – Rather than comparing and sorting through multiple vendors, you can deal with just one vendor, one invoice and one point of contact for sales and service. If something goes wrong with your system, there's no "blame game" among multiple disparate vendors; you'll know who to call right away.
3. **Faster deployment and staff training** – No need to plow through multiple sets of instructions on setting up and integrating a variety of systems. Instead, quickly get staff members up to speed on a single system, and more efficiently train them on new features and applications.
4. **Faster availability and adoption of new features** – With a single vendor, your release cycles for upgrades, enhancements and bug-fixes are streamlined because you're only dealing with one system and vendor.

Is an Integrated Platform Right for You?

Despite the inherent advantages of using a single vendor platform, making the decision to go that way should not be treated lightly, especially if your organization has successfully relied for years on multiple vendor systems. You'll want to closely examine the business, strategic, operational and clinical impact of any move before making a final decision. That's the decision-making approach taken by a leading regional health care system, whose method offers a guide to other organizations facing a similar decision.

The health care system was maintaining two separate EMR vendor platforms for its hospitals and medical centers which continuously strained its user and support bases. It also added to operating costs and impaired operational efficiencies.

The health system's leaders knew the potential benefits of switching to a single, integrated platform, including simplifying their technical environment, improving care coordination and staff satisfaction, and enhancing safety and patient experience. They could also foresee how standardizing applications synced with the organization's long-term business growth plans.

Conversely, the system's leaders knew there would be a substantial immediate cost in changing to a single application. Additionally, this change would likely take years to fully accomplish, alter operations across the enterprise, and create significant strain during the transition period. All of these potential downsides needed to be weighed.

The health system identified three principal tasks in its decision-making process:

- Assessing the current state of the system's application approach
- Defining the potential future state of a single vendor application platform
- Analyzing and giving feedback on all associated benefits vs. constraints regarding this decision

In assessing the current-state applications approach versus a desired future state, the health care system's leaders decided to confine their analysis and recommendations to seven principal areas of focus. These were:

1. Patient experience, safety, satisfaction and consumerism
2. Care and administrative team satisfaction and operational efficiency
3. Care continuum and coordination
4. Standardization and streamlined interoperability
5. IT staff optimization and retention
6. Market growth and innovation
7. Cost savings and financial benefits

Based on these areas of focus, the health care system performed a contextual analysis of its principal competitors and the health care market in general. The analysis revealed that the organization risked significantly lagging behind its competitors and the industry by supporting a multi-vendor system.

For example, the health care system's competitors had already adopted integrated application platforms, and thus were better able to share capabilities and forge strategic partnerships across multiple entities. This provided these competitors with greater functionality and more opportunities for implementing new technologies to meet their patient needs and expectations.

When analyzing how a single-vendor application environment could align with its business and IT strategic objectives, the health care system identified the following potential benefits:

- Enhancing data governance, risk mitigation, security and informatics
- Standardizing and streamlining interoperability across all business units
- Increasing market share growth capacity
- Improving the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of IT operations
- Supporting and improving physician alignment

In sum, the health care system's needs assessment showed how a single-vendor applications platform could likely support all seven of its primary focus areas. For example, from a patient care view, it would improve the overall coordination of clinical care and reduce the likelihood of records-related errors. It would also offer several enhanced patient-facing tools to increase patient engagement, retention and loyalty.

Conclusion

Organizations deliberating the long-term value of a single-vendor applications platform would be wise to consider performing a systematic analysis of their current state versus desired future state. By methodically thinking through both the potential positives and negatives of this decision, you'll have a much higher degree of confidence in the accuracy of your final choice. You'll also gain, by extension, a roadmap for implementing a single applications platform if you decide to go in that direction.