

ToolWorx

Software Alternatives

Commercial Package

For every type and size of business, there are usually several (and sometimes hundreds of) software packages that have been developed over the years specifically for any given industry. These packages can range in price from hundreds of dollars to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Each has its own set of features and functions and can typically be demonstrated either in a vendor's conference room or at a user site.

The biggest advantage to purchasing a commercial package from an established vendor is that the software can be evaluated against user requirements to determine the appropriate fit. It is a true "what-you-see-is-what-you-get" analysis in that you can "touch and feel" what you are buying before you commit. In addition, once you decide to purchase a package, it can generally be delivered immediately in the time that it takes to copy a disk or CD.

One disadvantage is that most software packages were originally developed for one customer many years ago and then generalized over the years to make it more generic and commercially acceptable. Consequently, most commercial "canned" packages are not a perfect match for the way any individual business is run. Moreover, once you commit to a package, customization (beyond creating additional reports based on existing data) is both expensive and creates warranty and/or upgrade challenges.

Another disadvantage is that you typically receive (and pay for) functionality you do not need or want. This increases implementation and training time in that you have to devise "workarounds" to bypass processes that are not relevant to your workflow. In many cases, organizations tend to change their business processes to match the system, which can be counterproductive.

However, the biggest disadvantage is that these packages cannot easily integrate with existing systems and databases. As a result, you end up having to replace internal systems that work well for your business with canned software that is not nearly as good a fit. Then, you turn around and have to customize those canned systems (or develop additional applications) to restore the functionality you lost when you implemented the canned package. This is an expensive waste of resources.

Custom Software

Many companies employ or contract programmers to write software for them, typically after a search and analysis of commercial packages turns up empty. The primary advantage of this approach is that the users get exactly what they want. The biggest disadvantage is that it takes an inordinate amount of time to develop, debug, and implement custom software. Moreover, by the time it is completed, the requirements have changed and you start the development cycle over again. This phenomenon is called “scope creep” and ensures that software is never “done”.

In addition, custom software also can be difficult to maintain as the programmers who wrote the system move on to other jobs or contracts. This increases the risk of obsolescence as technology and user requirements change.

Customized ToolWorx Components

ToolWorx offers a compromise between commercial canned packages that do not fit your business needs exactly and custom software that takes too long to deliver and is difficult to maintain. We offer this compromise, or as we call it, the best of both worlds, by combining off-the-shelf components that provide 80% of most base user functionality with customized “scripts” tailored to individual user requirements. This is similar to purchasing a “spec home” that is 80% complete but can be customized inside quickly and inexpensively.

A complete description of our development methodology can be found under the ToolWorx Software Methodology section of this document. However, the biggest advantage to our approach is that you can acquire a customized system in a short period of time (usually within 30-60 days) that is easy to expand and maintain.