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TECH BUYER BEWARE: FUNCTIONALITY ISN'T EVERYTHING

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For many sewn-products companies, evaluating and purchasing technology solutions that meet their needs can be a daunting task. With so many vendors offering what appear to be highly similar solutions, it's no wonder that even the most astute buyers have trouble sorting it all out.

Just consider, for example, the vast number of software products that are marketed as solutions for all your supply chain problems. Then add the cryptic and seemingly endless list of acronyms that the tech industry promotes; CAD, PDM, PLM, EPR, SCM, SRM, PRM, CRM, etc., and we then begin to appreciate the buyers' challenge.

One retail executive summed it up for me recently by saying, "I thought that negotiating and buying apparel packages from Asia every day was a challenge, until I tried to buy software for my product development team!"

The stakes are even higher when we consider the strategic importance of proper technology selection. With time and resources at a premium, today's sewn-products executives know that accurate evaluation, including the choice to remain with an existing vendor or move in a new direction, is critical to their company's future. Making a wrong choice may cause a company to fall behind and never recover.

When it comes to evaluating technology, it's clear that matching a product's functionality to specific business needs is an important part of the selection process. But while functionality is critical, it doesn't reveal the whole picture.

First there is the challenge of identifying the proven capabilities of the product vs. planned product enhancements. How do you react when a software vendor promises the functionality you want in the next release? Although placing too much stock in future "releases" is not advised, buyers who focus solely on today's functionality may fail to uncover the best long-term choice for their company. Functionality is a moving target and, in the highly competitive technology market, specific functionality is almost never an exclusive advantage for any vendor - at least not for long.

Perhaps more important than product functionality is the measurement of the value each potential vendor offers as a strategic partner to your company. We recommend that buyers heavily weigh vendor/partner factors such as industry expertise, technology platform and architecture, and implementation experience. The ability of a vendor to deliver on these important advantages will play a critical role in the long-term success of your technology project.

How many times have we seen great products fail to crossover into sewn-products because the vendor did not appreciate the complexity of our industry? In an increasingly decentralized business model, will technology architecture play an important role in enabling collaboration across your supply chain? And, with systems expanding to cover more business processes, could a vendor with deep enterprise implementation experience save you time and money?

In the end, buyers may opt for better long-term fit over current product functionality, or vice-versa. In all cases, including these and other top-level criteria in the technology evaluation will help buyers uncover competitive advantages that may provide them with the edge they need to successfully leverage their tech purchases.