

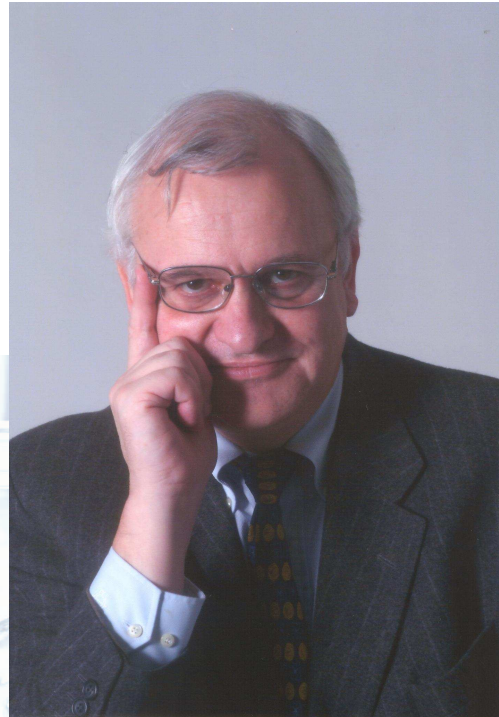
## **Power from software**

Last month I examined how we use of the various software packages, including word-processors and spreadsheets as well as other standard packages, to harness the power of computers.

### ***Moving on***

There comes a time, however, when the requirements of a business reach the limits of general software.

It is at this point that you need to consider either procuring specialised software or commissioning bespoke development. This is a significant point in the development of a business and a step that needs to be taken with great care. The consequences, be they good or bad, will last for many years.



### ***What do you need, exactly?***

Before looking at specific packages it is important to spend time analysing your requirements. This is something you can do yourself, or the experience of a consultant can be helpful. It is vital to identify all the different aspects and how important each is to you (nice-to-have, important, mandatory). It's helpful to engage as many people as possible in the process, including staff and customers as well as suppliers. One idea is to identify a similar business to yours (in a different geographical area) with whom you could share information.

Once the requirements are clear, finding the correct package can be the hardest part of the exercise. Possible sources include Internet searches, trade directories, contacts within your own industries, specialised software houses, etc. Remember, as well as general business packages, to also consider accounting packages as these often go way beyond pure accounting and may well meet your needs. Ideally you will assemble a small number of candidate packages you will be able to evaluate against your requirements.

### ***Implementation is critical***

I will consider implementation in a future column, however, having made the choice it is important to work through the package and carefully define how you will use it. You must plan the implementation and training in great detail. Depending on the potential impact on your business and workflow, a consultant maybe of help with this stage too.

### ***The alternative***

Provided you can find a package that is a good match for your business, it can be a quick and relatively in-expensive way of providing the software infrastructure you require. However, you may find that the match is not a good as you would like, and if any changes are later required these can be hard or even impossible to introduce.

If you fail to find a package that meets your needs, then it is time to consider having a package developed specifically to meet your requirements. This is likely to be relatively expensive option so you should not consider it until you have exhausted the alternatives. If you do pursue this route you will find you not only do you have software that meets your needs, but it will also be adaptable as the business develops and changes.

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