

Evaluation Guide

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1.0 Introduction to the Symmetry

The Symmetry Evaluation Guide

Symmetry has over 100 customers in the UK education sector and has many years' experience in responding to tenders and evaluation documents in recent years.

Advice on the review processes – common approaches and ideas

Unsurprisingly our consultants have often been asked by buying teams for advice on what questions to ask and how best to structure a professional software evaluation. In response to these requests, and after talking at length to our customers both during and after their evaluations, we developed the Symmetry Evaluation Guide.

Our intention is to use our experience in software evaluation, in particular within the education sector, to help organisations choose the system that best meets their needs.

A logical structure

The Guide includes an example specification to cover supplier companies, implementation planning and services provision. A reasonably detailed functional specification allows for tailoring so that you can simply adapt the template to reflect precisely your organisation's requirements by scaling it down or using as a starting point. And, the sample format for supplier presentations is designed to help you get the maximum information from each meeting, whilst catering for the increasing numbers of different end users involved in a review process.

A fair and simple comparison

The Guide is intended to enable you to request sufficient information, within a logical structure, to allow a fair and simple comparison of all the companies and software packages under evaluation.

The Guide's purpose is to enable you to use your time and resources to the best possible effect – in selecting the right system for your organisation.

Copies of the Guide are also available on CD in word format on request.

We would ask that the use of this guide material is restricted to your own organisation's review of software.

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2.0 The Software Review Process

2.1 General

The processes that organisations go through to review and select a new finance package vary from site to site. Some may take 6-9 months to select a system, others 2-3 months. Whatever the time-scale, the review can often take up unexpected amounts of your time and can easily overshoot the target date for a decision.

Our intention with this guide is to impart to you ideas based upon our experience of many different review processes, building a document designed to work from both the buyer's and supplier's point of view.

A good review process benefits both parties involved in the procurement of a new system. If the purchasing organisation follows a well structured and sufficiently detailed review process, suppliers have an opportunity to distinguish themselves from others, which in turn means that the purchasers can make a better informed decision. There are many other factors that need to be taken into consideration such as giving suppliers an equal opportunity and following your organisation's procurement procedures. It is also important to shortlist early enough to allow enough time to review short-listed suppliers in detail.

2.2 Staff involved

The number and kind of staff involved in an evaluation varies from site to site. Sometimes the project is driven by Finance staff, sometimes by MIS. The most organised reviews have one central point of contact for suppliers to deal with, with a number of key staff involved in the project present at all presentations and demonstrations. Typically, a Finance Manager/Director would be the key contact, with the MIS manager and other college finance staff involved in the decision.

A key to the successful implementation of a devolved system often starts in the review process. Departmental staff who have not previously had access to the finance system may now be affected by the final choice of solution and often wish to be involved in the review process. Obviously, involving large numbers of end users in many system demonstrations is not possible, however their buy-in to the project is often essential. Our customers who have involved end users in the selection process have found that the acceptance of the new system is correspondingly higher.

An example format for a second more detailed demonstration for short-listed suppliers is suggested in Appendix C to help cater for all types of users – management team, finance staff and departmental users.

2.3 Where do you start !

Before starting the review process most sites have an idea of their buying criteria. This may be a combination of product functionality specific to education or your own organisation (i.e.: Commitment Accounting, VAT partial exemption etc) to company factors (i.e.: how many education customers do they have, are they the author of the software or acting in a reseller capacity).

It is not unusual for organisations to receive information from over 15 financial solution suppliers. This is not generally a manageable number to review in detail. To make the best of valuable review time, and to save unsuitable suppliers from answering detailed tender documents, many organisations issue a broad pre-tender questionnaire to then identify a manageable number of potential suppliers (usually between 4 and 8).

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2.4 Pre-tender questionnaire

This pre-tender questionnaire would consist of general company and product questions designed to identify, early on, suppliers who would not provide the profile or level of system you require. This is often not obvious from reading through the glossy product brochures or starting with a simple list of ledgers that every supplier will have. Areas that you may wish to focus on to identify potential suppliers at high level break down into several areas. The emphasis put upon these varies from site to site.

Software

Core Functionality

Integration with other MIS systems

Management Reporting – standard / ad-hoc

Provision for devolvement to departments – processing and /or reporting

Technology – Network, Database, hardware related

Web enabled and e-commerce capabilities

Company

Author of software or reseller

Experience in your market

Customer base – general / FE / HE / University as appropriate

Staff resources and experience

Support Service

Implementation experience – general and similar projects

Ball park costs for your basic requirements (usually based upon numbers of core users and implementation time-scales to give a broad figure)

The capital cost / ongoing costs of a system may be particularly important and you may have a definite maximum figure in mind. If this is the case, then the pre-tender questionnaire should also be used to highlight those suppliers whose total cost will be outside of your available budget, despite possibly being able to provide you with everything you have ever wanted in a finance system.

Most suppliers should be happy to give you a ball-park figure for software / implementation and support costs and this will give you a range of total costs to work from. Some flexibility is obviously needed to make sure good systems are not excluded and value for money is also taken into account.

Some suppliers will inevitably fall outside this range, mostly due to the level of system they are supplying and the target market, i.e.: very small organisations or very large. If you provide suppliers with enough background information, they will also be able to advise whether their system is applicable to your organisation. Both suppliers and purchasers will be evaluating the suitability of each other before a large amount of work is done. A supplier's existing customer base will also tell you a lot about the system's target market and where that company has been most successful.

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Appendix A includes a general education functional specification that may be included in a pre-tender questionnaire or as a section in a larger tender document. However this guide is used, it may assist you in identifying key differences between suppliers early on in the review process.

2.5 Invitation to Tender

By this stage you will have either issued a pre-tender questionnaire and/or have created a "long list" of potential suppliers to look at. In this example we will use an average number of 8 suppliers to move through to the next stage of review.

The long-listed suppliers have been able to give general, satisfactory answers to your essential requirements and you now need a mechanism to review them in more detail. This is usually provided by a first demonstration or a more detailed tender document.

About half of organisations opt for the demonstrations of the software first, getting new ideas for the tender document. The other half issue a tender document and then arrange first demonstrations once it is clear which elements are being proposed to meet your requirement. This is really a matter of preference and your own procurement procedures may require formal tenders to go out first.

The combination of Appendix A and B will give you quite detailed information about product and company. Again they are designed to be a starting point that will need to be tailored to your organisation's requirements.

A recent survey of many types of organisation, revealed that the top priorities on system selection were no longer just functionality but implementation factors (i.e.: a painless transition from one system to another) through to the quality of support service after implementation.

One of the most important tools you have to assess the quality of implementation services and support is to speak to and visit reference sites. This will be covered in a later section.

Details of reference sites, a consultancy proposal with draft implementation plan, draft legal agreements and copies of company financial accounts are standard inclusions in most tenders. Depending on the complexity of the tender documents, 3 / 4 weeks from issue to closing date for responses is common.

Key staff involved in the review should have their own copy of the tender, as product brochures and other information is difficult to photocopy and it loses the presentation factors that show which suppliers have taken time and trouble with their responses. Suppliers are used to providing 3 / 4 copies of each tender document when requested. If you do not mention how many copies you require, you are likely to receive calls from every supplier on this point alone.

2.6 First Demonstrations

You may well have chosen all 8 suppliers to give a first demonstration, or short-listed from tender responses to 4 or less. The format of a first presentation should be designed to give the key review staff a first impression of all the software proposed without going into a huge amount of detail on each system which can take some time.

A good overview of most systems and company can be achieved in a presentation session of 2 / 3 hours. This is usually sufficient to then shortlist 2 / 3 suppliers to move forward to detailed presentations, involving more end users and other staff.

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A good format is to try and see most suppliers in a short space of time. Most people have difficulty remembering and comparing systems objectively when large numbers of suppliers are involved or when presentations are far apart.

A checklist of essential items and first impressions of software is helpful for review after the presentations, to gauge everyone's feedback and jog memories of the systems seen earliest in the process.

2.7 Second Demonstrations

Wishing to involve many types of end user in the review but also trying to draw up a suitable agenda for all, can be a headache. We have found that sites that split a morning's demonstration session into two manage to achieve this.

Senior management staff have different requirements from the review process. They wish to know about the company they are investing in, are they going to get the high level of management reporting they require, and also can they, as non-finance / IT users, have access to the type of information they need to make strategic decisions.

Finance or departmental users often wish to see their area of the finance system and are concerned with day to day processing and reporting in their own areas. Particularly when moving from a character based system to windows based or to devolved access there is often some apprehension about changing systems. This is often related to users' ability to carry on working quickly and efficiently, with an easy to learn / use system.

For these reasons two sections to a presentation work well to address SMT issues but also provide enough detail for end users. It is also an efficient use of everyone's time. Incidentally, it is also a good test for a supplier to be able to communicate effectively benefits of their solution to all potential users.

An example agenda for a second presentation in this split format is included in Appendix C. More emphasis could be given to different topics depending on your requirements and staff.

2.8 Short-listing and Reference site visits

Most organisations we have dealt with shortlist to 2 suppliers to then take to the reference site stage. This depends on time available and how close the short-listed systems are to your requirements.

Reference visits are important in any review. Until now the system has been demonstrated in a clean environment with no feedback on qualitative factors such as ease of implementation, support during implementation, what the staff are like to deal with or quality of support following implementation.

We encourage prospect sites to visit at least one customer, sometimes two, and to phone maybe 3 / 4 other customers. This will also help you back up your final decision to any executive board reviewing your selection process and decision. You may wish to visit a site similar to yourselves or one slightly larger to allow for future growth. These preferences should be discussed with the supplier so you visit a suitable site that is going to provide the answers you need.

Some larger organisations may choose to have an extended period of on-site testing before final selection.

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2.9 Final Selection

A final meeting with your preferred supplier to discuss terms and conditions of sale, including a review of licences required following end user feedback, is common.

Most organisations require a report to be presented at a board / executive meeting. The frequency of these meetings is something to consider before you start a review.

The selection process can be very time consuming for all concerned, and it is very useful for all suppliers to get feedback on their performance during the review.

The next stage!

Having completed the evaluation you should now be ready to move into the implementation phase, confident that the right selection for your organisation has been made, based upon a fair and objective review process.



We hope this guide has been useful; if you would like further information please call us on 0117 900 6262. Alternatively, email sales@symmetry.co.uk

3.0 Typical life cycle of a College software review

Life cycle of a typical College review process for a new Financial Solution

This life cycle assumes that the college wishes to implement for an August live date, although this is completely flexible.

