

The

NO-NONSENSE

guide to software

IBM produces business software. And it's good stuff too. Did you know? Keith Ryan passes on the secrets of the largest software company you've never heard of.

Let's be blunt: IBM is not the first name you think of when it comes to software. But Big Blue is the world's second largest software provider, has the broadest portfolio of software products for business and a network of experts on stand-by. It knows a thing or two about how tech can work for real businesses.

"Software – and tech in general these days – is being used fairly haphazardly in the small, entrepreneurial businesses that make up such a big part of our economy," explains Pete Jakob, IBM Software Group marketing

manager (UKISA). "Successful start-ups, for example, will bring together the few bits of software and hardware they think they need in the short term but after a few years, the company grows, demand rises and the technology can't handle it. The original piecemeal approach works against them and they're faced with a harsh reality: keep patching the system or start from scratch?"

With this in mind, we offer the key questions you should be asking about the IT cluttering up your company.

1

Does it work with what you've got?

No business owner wants to admit that the IT systems in place aren't good enough. Starting from scratch isn't usually an option, because the IT systems typically evolved with the business functions, from the email system to the security in place. IBM's software is adaptable and open enough to either improve your existing systems or make them more functional than they are right now – you shouldn't need to completely overhaul your IT and this doesn't demand that you do.

2 Can it grow with your company?

It's the bane of the successful business – how do you develop the resources you need to expand, explore new business avenues and so on, without over indulging? Having an IT option that is – to use an industry term – “scalable” can be a godsend. It's like adding or removing pieces of a puzzle, and building as integrated a picture as you want or need. It also lets your systems and your people work in a collaborative way, which means employees aren't hiding in their departments and avoiding eye contact.

3 Will it help you cover your assets?

Depending on who you believe, hackers are just desperate to steal the vital bits of your business (even if you don't know what that might be or where it's stored). But most industrial security problems involve people already in the building – employees. And their “hacking” isn't sophisticated, just opportunistic. The key is access: who can get to what and how easily? IBM software can control access and ID management, and protect and store your data in a structured way. It means the system knows who has their hands on your sensitive data – and stops those who shouldn't.

4 Does it know your business?

Most popular software brands are appealing because they're generic – they meet the needs of the greatest number of people. But your business has specific needs and requirements that aren't “off the shelf”. What if you want your mobile sales force to use one communications system that allows you to track sales in real time and control inventory, for example? Store-bought “solutions” aren't always going to be the way forward – and more often than not, they end up dictating how you do business. The best IT options stem from an understanding of your company.

5 Is it going to break the bank?

The pattern runs something like this: small business buys software as needed; business grows and more software is bought, along with new computers and servers; small business becomes medium-sized business, and demand outstrips capacity; a patchwork quilt of tech takes over and system failure looms. As a result, the frugal business spends far more than intended over the long term on what becomes redundant IT. It's a false economy and businesses fall victim to it time and again. IBM software was created to be future-safe, an adaptable option that isn't just for the big Blue Chips.



IBM Software: in a nutshell

WebSphere: Lets all of your systems – from communications to data processing – and employees talk with each other in the best possible way.

Lotus: For safe and sound communications – more than just your friendly neighbourhood email system. Secure communication and collaboration tools that improve productivity for you and your business

Rational: A sensible approach to software development – for once, you can let your business decide how the tech fits in.

Tivoli: Keeps a close eye on the software running your business process management systems – so your company can keep running smoothly.

Information Management: Brings content and information together and then makes it available in just the right way.

