

Homegrown apps rule

THE INDIAN EDUCATIONAL FRATERNITY PREFERS HOMEGROWN IT OVER BRANDED OFFERINGS

BY N GEETHA

There is no doubt that the academia is deploying enterprise application software such as ERP, BI, CRM across academic, scientific research and administrative functionalities, but the thrust has been placed on homegrown applications rather than off-the-shelf stuff. A testimony to this effect is reflected by the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai's experience with an ERP system called NISEC developed by TCS for accounting and payroll. Professor Sudarshan, head-application software, IIT Mumbai, claimed that this ERP system had several lacunae as most modules failed to work despite a good amount of tweaking being done. A conscious decision was taken by the professor and his team to develop in-house enterprise applications for administrative and academic purposes such as HR (employee information systems) and for academic online grading registration system. According to Prof. Sudarshan, the HR, accounting, payroll etc., were developed on J2EE, with Oracle database and backend using PostgreSQL. Besides keeping the cost under check, IIT Mumbai expects to see a superior RoI combined with greater scalability for its online module with more students added to its rolls every year, with the current number standing at 5,000.

Unlike corporate houses or enterprises, this sector goes swears by basic access and priority, combined with keeping costs down.

However, Sanjay Mehta, CEO on MAIA Intelligence finds that using enterprise applications such as Business Intelligence can help IT heads of the educational sector to monitor grants, research, patents and faculty retention etc., while taking informed and better decisions at all levels. The benefits that Mehta finds include the fact that institutions can effectively calculate curriculum costs, identify good fundraising programs, monitor student headcount and performance, program outcomes, school reputation, national agendas, and other KPIs.

Ramco System's CEO Kamesh Rama Moorthy finds awareness with regard to deploying enterprise applications is on the rise amongst educational institutions that want to have a competitive edge and maintain international standards. Ramco's Rama Moorthy has been tapping campuses such as MIT and others in a concerted manner with its ERP On-Demand model where the investment is negligible for the concerned institutions. "We have seen campuses going for multiple applications such as teaching methodology, teaching tools inventory tracking, accounts, payroll and tracking expenditure," averred Rama Moorthy.

Interestingly, Goa University shares the same opinion of settling for homegrown applications after having tested the outsourced ERP model. Dr. Venkatesh Kamat, head-IT, Goa University observed, "Realizing that a piecemeal approach of developing applications was not a good idea, we outsourced it to a third party to develop modules for accounting, payroll, inventory, education systems, registration etc., and to our shock no company was in a position to deliver as per our requirement."

Given the labor challenges, the complexity of solutions that the education sector demands and the challenge of running outdated systems, developing intricate solutions was a Herculean task for Goa University. Dr. Kamat and his team intended to take another chance to outsource the development task. "We roped in Mumbai based Dimensions along with Wipro as our partner to develop ERP applications across varied functionalities for us having certain installed references," maintained Kamat.

Having certain inherent deterrent factors associated with proprietary software, Kamat is insisting on developing the ERP modules using Open Source platforms.

There have been instances of branded applications being used though infrequently. Chennai-based SIP Academy India Pvt Ltd. the Indian arm of SIP Academy SDN BHD, Malaysia is an organization that develops children's skills. It was look-

ing for an ERP system that would enable it to track and reconcile inventory on a real-time basis from multiple locations, evaluate the performance of each Learning Center, and generate reports based on key operational parameters.

SIP's managing director Dinesh Victor zeroed in on implementing Ramco On Demand ERP suite comprising bookkeeping, Inventory, Management Accounting, MIS, Payable Management, Purchase, Receivable, Sales and Shipping.

"We found that the cost of acquisition was minimal as we procured 20 user licenses going by the SaaS model costing Rs 4,000 per month per user," said Victor. According to him, the On Demand ERP system has enabled the parent company and area partners to transact their business using the same application, resulting in better understanding and improved overall efficiency.

One of the factors preventing most institutions from going in for branded software is the fact that in the education segment, institutions face a funds crunch. Except for top business schools and premier institutions, most universities need to depend on AICTE, UGC or state government support for infrastructure development. This also impedes the growth of IT automation and modernization.

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL VENTURE

Dr. P.V. Ramana, founder of the Institute for Technology and Management (ITM) Business School said that ITM is connected and managed through an in-house developed ERP. Dr. Srinivasa Rao, director of ITM Business School Bangalore, maintained, "All our centers use the ERP modules developed in-house on Java and PostgreSQL with modules related to admission, accounts, library, academics and examinations."

ITM managed to invest around Rs 50 lakhs on developing these modules including the training and labor cost in a phased manner.

ITM's Dr. Rao has witnessed the benefits of easy manageability of the business, easier recruitment process, easy reporting and real time data on student performance, besides greater transparency on bank transactions.

Not contented with this, ITM has plans of evolving more modules and initiatives in the direction moving forward. "We will roll out modules that give parents online access to grading systems and so on," pointed out Dr. Rao. ITM has planned for Statistical Software such as SPSS or SYS-



DINESH VICTOR,
Managing director, SIP

TAT to be deployed based on the requirement.

A premier institution such as the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) is in the process of developing an ERP solution and the system requirement specification process is on. Shiv Kumar, Systems Manager (Computer Centre), TISS, observed, "Currently we are testing various modules related to our business functionality which will move to a live server to enable the students to take advantage of the ERP system."

According to Shiv Kumar, SPSS, GAMS, ESRI, Atlas-ti are the applications that are being used for various courses and going forward applications such as STATA, END-Note, and SAS will be deployed.

IIT's Prof Sudarshan is in the process of evaluating the ERP market and possibly evaluating brands for future deployments on course management modules and for academic purposes. ■