

Topic:
PLM

PLM — on target?

iCAD is produced by Business Advantage, a B2B research, business development and marketing consulting practice operating in the global IT, Digital and Telecommunication sectors.

What do the Aerospace and Defence industries think of the current PLM offerings for their sector?

Are product suppliers truly hitting the mark with their PLM (Product Lifecycle Management) offerings for the Aerospace and Defence (A&D) sector? From research recently carried out by Business Advantage, it seems not – especially for the smaller companies/Strategic Business Units (SBUs) in this area.



Business Advantage researchers talked to some senior designers and engineers working for a number of aerospace and defence companies. We asked for these users' views of both PLM suppliers in general and current products in particular. Because only thirteen companies were interviewed the results cannot be not regarded as statistically significant; however, they do provide an insight into the minds of A&D engineering directors.

Some companies had not yet implemented a PLM system, some had looked at them, but were in the process of sourcing one. Others had 'off the shelf' products and yet others had chosen to go the route of a bespoke system.

What PLM Offers?

- Link up the product data of a whole company
- Allow complete traceability of versions, raw materials, parts, suppliers, stock systems
- Improve data flow and so improve business decision-making and corporate growth
- Have an easily accessible central archive of drawings
- Monitor production lines, reduce costs
- Track down faults and rectify

But do smaller companies/SBUs want all this?

Flexibility in question

A number of themes emerged from the discussions held. In general users were critical of the PLM suppliers' perceived unwillingness to provide products which truly met their individual needs.

“They want to supply an “all-singing, all-dancing model”, which we don’t want – too expensive” was one comment.

This mirrored the design engineer who stated that:

“The software they use is often not cost-effective and they try to make one system fit all users”

Another commented:

“Vendors desire to sell an out of the box solution, and expect our business to alter its processes to suit it, rather than understand our requirements and needs.”

Another company complained of both a lack of relevant functionality and bugs in the system, yet another that it had been sold a supposedly mature product that turned out to be anything but that. One Director shared his obvious frustrations:

“They seem to struggle to identify things that are obvious to us.”

Referring to PLM vendors, another hoped that they would be:

“...coming up with a cost effective PLM solution, something middle of the road for the needs of a middle sized company”



For PLM software companies, enterprise-wide systems are a 'big ticket' sale; this may have resulted in sales efforts in the past being focused too much in this direction. However, for middle-sized A&D companies and SBUs, the needs and desires from the system are different, often more localised. In only half of the companies surveyed that already had PLM, was it integrated with the rest of the company.

Sometimes too pushy!

The sales person who can combine a strong sales ability with an extensive grasp of the technical capabilities is a rare animal, but needed in this sector. One Engineering Director complained of the:

“Hard sell; want to talk to someone with more understanding of our needs.”

Encouragingly for PLM vendors, where companies did not have a PLM, there was recognition of the business case for introducing one: that it had the potential to significantly increase their rate of growth.

Satisfaction

Out of the engineers and designers questioned, only two respondents rated the initiative and willingness of providers highly. Business Advantage asked exactly how satisfied users were with the systems: while the overwhelming majority were 'satisfied', only one respondent was very satisfied.



Central repositories for digital data

The majority of companies, whether they had PLM or not, had implemented a central repository for digital data.

Decision-makers

It seems most of the decisions to buy a particular product are devolved to the SBU (strategic business unit). The SBU often does not want or need the breadth and scope of a product written to run company-wide.

Another view

An interesting point was made by a Technical Director who reasoned that:

“...any requirement for PLM is so particular to any one organisation that [software vendors] have no chance of ever being up-to-speed.”

A one-size-fits-all approach is probably never going to satisfy the very particular needs of the aerospace and defence sector.

Conclusions

The prime focus of PLM vendors will always be on the 'big-ticket' item; however they also need to focus on entry-level options for middle-sized companies/SBUs.

Additionally PLM vendors should consider increasing the technical capability of their sales teams and training them to better understand the needs of the potential PLM user.

Business Advantage has provided research and business development services for companies operating in the global PLM sector for many years. Please visit our [PLM](#) pages on our web site for more information.

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