

The Evolution of CI Software

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Just as organisms and species evolve to meet the ecological requirements and environmental conditions in which they thrive, so to do dominant business models necessarily adapt to the changing landscapes of the operating environments in which their firms compete. Just look at the evolution of the software industry over the past few years. As the technologies upon which software systems were intended to run evolved over time, the dominant business model (installed, server-based solutions) has begun to give way to a more streamlined, web-based hosted solution. Commonly referred to as 'software as a service' (SAAS), the new model carries major implications for traditional software providers.

Often, when we think of competitive intelligence software, we can't help but recall the sophisticated full-scale packages that dominated the CI software space until recently. As a breed, these full-service software suites proclaim to be a panacea for almost all your CI needs. From planning and information collection to analysis and reporting, these suites offer a host of tools that are able to address nearly every stage in the CI life-cycle. Interestingly, the all-inclusive nature of these packages, responsible for their greatest strengths, is simultaneously the root of their greatest weaknesses as they are often cumbersome to install and costly to maintain. They also carry a steep learning curve, and require jumping through corporate IT procurement policies and lengthy roll out procedures.

For a variety of technological reasons, full-service CI software packages evolved in an environment that rewarded large, installed, server or mainframe-based technology packages. As Internet bandwidths increased over time and the software as a service (SAAS) model began to gain traction, CI software firms (like many others) were slow to get in on the ground floor. This opened the door for a cavalcade of

hosted CI solutions that were more dexterous, functionally targeted, and easily implemented. In fact, because the operating environment began to favor the hosted solution model, the large, full-scale software solutions, though admittedly more feature-rich, have been put at a disadvantage.

But while proponents of SAAS will have you believe that the shift towards a new business model is paradigmatic rather than fad, the new generation of CI technology tools has much ground to cover if it is to completely displace installed, server-based solutions. Critically, most new solutions do not offer support over the entire CI life-cycle. In addition, hosted solutions tend not to be able to address the needs of complex CI functions as a result of their often-limited functionality (though this appears to be changing). Nevertheless, SAAS in the CI sphere may well be the future, but CI practitioners in need of a tool that covers the entire range of the CI cycle may have to wait for such a product.

To be sure, the giants of the CI software space became dominant for a reason – they were able to offer services and features that no other tool could match in a way that made sense within the operating context in which they evolved. But just as the lumbering dinosaurs came to recede from a rapidly changing ecology, so too has the software environment evolved, causing some to question whether the time has come for the giants of the software world to concede their place to a novel, more nimble generation of CI software solutions.

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