

## Sorting Through the Clutter of Software Solutions

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The technology industry is a complex maze of different software and applications —complete with confusing abbreviations and updated version numbers. Sometimes it seems practically impossible to differentiate one product from another, let alone understand what they do or how they could improve your organization's operation. Not to worry, though. With some research into products and software, you can figure out which software offers the capabilities that are right for your organization.

To help pave a clearer path in this muddled field, this article presents an overview of the capabilities of product lifecycle management (PLM), enterprise resource planning (ERP), customer and marketing management (CMM), and supply-chain management (SCM) software.

### Product Lifecycle Management (PLM)

PLM solutions leverage data from across the entire organization to aid in the decision-making process regarding product development, management, design and production. With PLM, you can adjust every step of the product lifecycle to create higher-quality products and launch them in less time, at a lower cost, to maximize profits. PLM can be utilized across many different industries, from food and beverage, where it helps ensure that quality standards are met, to organizations that focus on manufacturing, providing visibility into product development across the entire organization.

In addition, PLM solutions help you to protect brand integrity and ensure compliance with appropriate standards and regulations for your industry. Product-lifecycle intelligence also allows you to leverage data across the organization and make real-time decisions about your products. On top of that, projects, portfolios, and bids are also easier to manage with PLM because it helps speed development of new products and variations.

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After the initial development, PLM software helps manage more product data to enable continuous improvement. Some PLM solutions also offer tools similar to social networking to allow for better collaboration across the organization. This way, suppliers, customers, and partners are all on the same page and receiving the same information.

### Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP)

ERP continues to evolve as a solution that improves the overall, day-to-day operations of an organization. ERP solutions deliver functionality and usability, more specifically for manufacturing and distribution industries. They're specially designed to help your organization work smarter and faster. One of ERP's main goals is to streamline operations to provide full visibility across the company, including access to information anytime, anywhere to improve the speed of response times.

ERP is also designed to be easily adaptable to new manufacturing methods, changing industry or customer requirements and ever-evolving business strategies. Furthermore, you can optimize inventory and production resources to increase overall efficiency. From getting better financial visibility and insight to managing the complexity of your manufacturing supply chain, ERP makes your organization run smoother.

Many trends are driving the evolution of ERP solutions. Quick adaption of process- and product-based technologies that promise immediate benefits to manufacturers is a huge driving factor. Increased interest in cloud computing, software as a service (SaaS), and server virtualization have played roles in opening up ERP to small- and mid-sized producers along supply chains. In addition, social business tools have changed ERP solutions so that critical knowledge can now be accessed at anytime.

### **Customer and Marketing Management (CMM)**

CMM provides organizations with a complete view of their customers at every stage of the marketing and sales cycle. CMM helps better align sales and marketing efforts, leading to better real-time information sharing, shared strategies, and more effective campaigns. Thanks to these more-aligned processes, CMM can help foster better and longer relationships with customers. CMM solutions provide valuable insight into customer feedback as well as sales analytics. This aids in the fine-tuning of messages for future marketing campaigns. Aligning both sales and marketing also creates a consistent brand image across all customer touch points, ensuring greater customer and brand loyalty.

CMM, like all of the applications on this list, can be utilized across many industries. For example, in distribution-focused organizations, CMM can help create a dialog between suppliers, distributors, and customers through social technologies and customer relationship management (CRM). In the hospitality industry, organizations are able to attract guests via personalized communication strategies. And retail organizations, with the help of CMM, can gain valuable insight into trends via social media and make the most of every interaction with a customer.

Other advantages of CMM solutions include real-time offer management, which allows you to reach out to customers with customized offers at peak times. Social marketing also expands reach and visibility of your content marketing strategy. CMM can even help reduce the time it takes to create and execute a new strategy. It can also be integrated with other tools, like ERP, to create a holistic view of the organization as well as customers.

### **Supply-Chain Management (SCM)**

SCM puts the power in your hands to plan and execute your supply-chain strategies faster and more profitably, from strategic and tactical planning to execution. Based around analytics, SCM provides all of the tools you need to optimize the supply chain from end to end. The tools can also help harness the power of social networking to collaborate more effectively internally as well as with customers, partners and suppliers.

Furthermore, SCM helps gain greater visibility into your supply chain to improve the utilization of resources and labor, and inventory and shipping accuracy. On top of that, it quickens any response to customer opportunities and fluctuations in the market.

Chemical and pharmaceutical companies, for example, you can respond faster and with more certainty to different issues in real time. You can also control supply-chain costs to get a more efficient production capacity. And automotive industries can reduce operational costs and improve efficiency, while collaborating with supply-chain partners and getting regular updates from suppliers.

SCM is built to optimize your entire supply chain, from forecasting to planning, scheduling, and execution. SCM solutions also offer ways to analyze your supply chain and communicate and collaborate more effectively, within your organization and with those outside as well. You're also able to maximize profits and see the impact in real time. In addition, with SCM, you can create the best supply-chain network for individual business needs and adjust as your business changes

Every organization has their own individual needs, but most are working toward the same end goals—running the business in the most efficient way, generating a profit, and pleasing customers. While there may be a maze of different products out there to help, you needn't be lost in the mess. Align your software and applications with organizational goals and find what best fits your organization's needs. Whether it's PLM, SCM, ERP, or CMM, finding the products that work for you and work together will optimize your daily business operations.

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