



MANUFACTURING SOFTWARE REVIEW

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Product Reviews

"We've Done the Homework for you!"

The Market for Manufacturing Solutions

When it comes to pure manufacturing, I believe that SYSPRO, Epicor, and Microsoft Axapta clearly stand alone as the top three system solutions in the marketplace. All three products offer complete, high-powered advanced distribution and discrete/process manufacturing solution. Axapta is the prettiest to look at, while SYSPRO offers significantly lower pricing. Both Epicor and SYSPRO lay claim to better manufacturing fundamentals while the Axapta's built-in wizards and product customization are very slick.

To be sure, there are at least 447 other manufacturing solutions in the marketplace that think that I am crazy for making this claim. However, I believe that there is enough basis to eliminate these other solutions from consideration, as follows:

Tier 1 Manufacturing Solutions - Traditional Tier 1 manufacturing solutions such as SAP, Oracle E-Business Suite, JD Edwards, BAAN, JBA, SSA and others are simply too complex and over priced compared to SYSPRO, Epicor, and Microsoft Axapta. Sure, five to seven years ago those Tier 1 solutions were the top dogs in the pack and many manufacturers needed to pick from this group. However by today's standards, these products look more like "bloatware" than "software". These ERP solutions have been so crammed full of features that companies must wade through ridiculously lengthy procedures just to write a check or print a report. Corporate America is fed up with Tier 1 solutions and they are running away from them in large numbers. I have assisted dozens of multi-billion dollar companies in dumping SAP, Oracle, PeopleSoft and JD Edwards in favor of less expensive, but better solutions. Today solutions such as SYSPRO, Epicor, and Microsoft Axapta not only run on the top databases and offer all of the modules you could ask for (save workflow), but they are far less expensive to purchase, implement, and maintain. They are also more easily customized, far easier to use and more proven.

High-End Manufacturing Solutions – There are many high-end manufacturing solutions in the marketplace such as MAS 500, Navision, ACCPAC ProSeries, MiSys with ACCPAC Advantage, and others. These products have many advantages and they all fit certain manufacturing niches very well. However MAS 500 does not yet offer options by components, Navision does not offer a solid process manufacturing solution, and ProSeries does not offer a web based product configurator. These solutions have merit, but can not yet be considered to be complete manufacturing solutions. Please note that these products are typically extremely well-suited for light manufacturing and heavy bill of material processing situations.

Vertical Manufacturing Solutions – There are hundreds of solutions designed specifically for manufacturing such as Symix, Made2Manage, I2, Interbiz, Manugistics, Indus, Qad, IFS, Mapics, etc. These systems are designed specifically for various manufacturing situations and years ago in the late

80's and early 90's, these solutions were the best avenue for manufacturers. However, if you examine these vertical solutions closely you will find significant shortcomings with all of them that can not be overlooked. These shortcomings typically include weak financial reporting, weak consolidation capabilities, proprietary technology, no customization tools, missing modules, missing features, weak product support, a skinny or non-existent distribution channel, a financially weak parent company, etc. Many of these solutions are designed to run stand alone and the customer is expected to pay large programming fees to integrate them into financial systems. With low priced and proven solutions such as SYSPRO, EPICOR, and Axapta available, it is folly to consider these higher priced solutions.

Given the short thesis presented above, the next logical question is which of these three manufacturing systems is the best solution. Well, I like them all, and here are a few comments about each:

Axapta - Axapta is attractive and well organized. It is very customizable (albeit complex). The built-in wizards walk the user through complex processes and the questionnaire module makes surveys a snap. However Axapta has no payroll module and the financial reporting is lacking. In the US, there are too few Axapta resellers who really know the product well, many of those resellers hire other Axapta resellers to put their systems in for them. For example Jeff Balyier of BKD in Indianapolis, IN spends most of his time supporting other Axapta resellers. Further, Axapta has only 300 customers in the US and one wonders whether Microsoft considers supporting a localized version of this product in the US worthwhile. Axapta is relatively inexpensive, with most customers paying between \$150,000 to \$300,000 for the complete system including installation. Overall, it is impressive.

Epicor - Epicor has 10,000+ manufacturing customers around the world and the product is widely considered to be a very good product. Epicor's web-based product configurator is perhaps the only web-based product configurator that beats SAP's. Epicor has learned a great deal about manufacturing systems over the past ten years - mostly by making every mistake in the book first hand. However the company has endured even through very tough financial years which sent prospects fleeing. Now that Epicor's stock is strong and the company is profitable, they are in a much better position to excel in the years to come. If only the company could muster up some marketing that actually worked, there would be no stopping Epicor. I like Epicor as a product and the feedback on this complex product is usually very good. (I should disclose to you that I personally own more Epicor stock than do any of Epicor's management team, so please digest my comments accordingly)

SYSPRO - While Axapta and Epicor are good solutions, SYSPRO is perhaps the best manufacturing solution on the planet dollar for dollar. The product is well proven and is packed with so many features that it gives even SAP a good run for the money. More than any other manufacturing product I've seen, SYSPRO is built upon sound manufacturing principles and process flow. The product offers the best solution for accounting for scrap that I have ever seen. SYSPRO incorporates all of the modules you would want. SYSPRO's shortcomings consist primarily of an older look and feel because it utilizes mono-space fonts in certain screens and reports, and in my opinion the company markets their product rather poorly. Additionally, in year's past SYSPRO suffered from stability issues, an image that haunts them today even though they overcame this particular problem years ago. SYSPRO's revenues run about \$55 million and I am told that the company is profitable. The product pricing is very low for a manufacturing solution and for companies who are looking for a good solution in the \$60,000 to \$120,000 range, SYSPRO might be just what the doctor ordered.

