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SYSPRO's Next Generation ERP: 7-on-7

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SYSPRO 7 Addresses 7 Manufacturing Market Demands

In a recent report, Mint Jutras described the next generation of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) in terms of better technology to deliver a new customer experience, custom configuration without programming, more innovation and better integration. You might think that ERP vendors must reinvent themselves or their products in order to offer up a next generation ERP. Companies reinvent themselves by acquiring other companies and technology, and/or scrapping the development of legacy applications in favor of writing new ones from scratch, new ones that take years to mature.

But if you think these are the only ways to deliver next generation ERP, then you don't know much about SYSPRO. SYSPRO has been around since 1978, but unlike most of the rest of the ERP world, still offers a single ERP which it has evolved to meet all the requirements of next generation ERP, but has done so using an approach that is unique to SYSPRO.

In the aforementioned report [ERP, The Next Generation: The Final Frontier?](#) we had some fun comparing ERP to the successful entertainment franchise, Star Trek. Like Star Trek, SYSPRO ERP is a long-running classic. Star Trek, The Next Generation debuted 21 years after the original series first aired. SYSPRO's next generation ERP took a little longer, 24 years after the company was founded. It was introduced in 2001 in response to what SYSPRO calls the "Extended Enterprise." And the parallels don't stop there.

The original Star Trek crew had a five-year mission to explore new worlds, travelling on the USS Enterprise. Early ERP often was viewed as a five-year investment. The new and evolved starship Enterprise in The Next Generation had an open-ended "continuing mission" to explore "*space: the final frontier... to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.*" ERP investments today are also seen as a "continuing mission" and SYSPRO views itself on a mission to make its installed base customers for life, helping mid-market manufacturers and distributors to explore new worlds and seek out life after traditional ERP in what has certainly become a strange new world.

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SYSPRO 7 is the most recent of many steps along SYSPRO's continuous journey, more a constant reinvention than the sudden birth of a new generation. While many limit beta testing to a very small sample of customers, a community of 600 early adopters has now tested this release.

Let's take a look at the SYSPRO "7-on-7" approach to meeting new market demands. The seven categories of advances cited by this community align quite closely to the next generation requirements in [ERP, The Next Generation: The Final Frontier](#):

1. New personalized customization and role-based optimization
2. New advanced functionality (like rapid sales order entry)
3. New device agnostic mobile capabilities
4. New industry templates for vertical markets (food, medical devices, electronics, machinery/equipment)
5. New data integration and toolsets that address the "big 3" issues of big data; volume, velocity and variety
6. New extended scalability to increase transaction throughput and transaction values including (optional) expanded field sizes
7. New and more powerful server side reporting solutions that speed processing and simplify the embedding of external data

Defining the SYSPRO Customer Experience

When most software vendors talk about the customer experience, you find them talking about the experience of using the software. Today that discussion starts with the user interface (IU) and then goes on to include web-based and mobile access. This "experience" is influenced heavily by the supposed "consumerization of IT." Certainly with the introduction of so many consumer applications, largely offered on smart phones and tablets, we have all become more demanding of user interfaces. Nobody has to read a manual to figure out a consumer app and we all make the assumption that we shouldn't have to read a manual to figure out ERP either.

So many solution providers of next generation ERP have redesigned how their customers engage with ERP, making it a "social" (or "Facebook-like") experience, typically taking a "Gen-Y" perspective and often guessing at what their customers and prospects really want. But here's the challenge: ERP is not a consumer app. ERP runs your business. And quite frankly, there aren't too many mid-market manufacturers and distributors that are run by Millennials of Generation Y. So sometimes these approaches don't resonate with those making the business decisions.

SYSPRO takes a completely different approach to "the customer experience." Instead of focusing exclusively on how its customers engage with SYSPRO ERP, it looks first and foremost at how those customers engage with SYSPRO, the company. Many companies talk about customer satisfaction and listening to the voice of the customer, but for SYSPRO, this is deeply embedded in its corporate culture. As a result, the customers have a profound influence over what SYSPRO then delivers by way of the user experience with the product. No guesswork is involved; no wondering how new engagement models designed for Gen-Y folks will be received by the Baby Boomer and Generation X executives at the helm.

This distinction is not lost on its customers. Vann Spices of Baltimore, MD has been a SYSPRO customer since 2009. Being in the food industry, the company had a long list of system requirements including lot sourcing and product traceability. Because it differentiates itself with custom mixes, it needs to be agile and have a firm grip on available

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ingredients, ordering, scheduling and billing. It has a variety of direct and indirect sales channels in premium markets like New York, Washington DC and San Francisco, plus website sales.

Mick Whitlock, Vann Spices' president sums it up well: "It's not just the lot traceability, reporting, UI and food safety certification controls that matter – as good as they **are** at SYSPRO. What's equally and potentially even more valuable to us, is that I always know the SYSPRO team has my back. The company executives and its service partners consistently show that they have my best interests at heart and will do whatever is necessary to keep my business running efficiently, no matter what happens.

"You ask a small company what that is worth – and they will tell you: **everything**. It's worth everything. Because without a technology partner like that, software is just software."

That said, the software is still important and if the software isn't easy to use, employees will spend more time and effort working around the system than with it, and executives will avoid it completely. They will rely on subordinates for data for decision making because they don't have time to figure ERP out. Yet as executives carry more and more mobile devices, expecting to stay connected wherever they are, they become more impatient waiting for data.

New options for the user interface provided in SYSPRO 7 reflect this growing impatience. Custom-configured dashboards, including a choice of graphical representations of key performance indicators (KPIs) are presented in one or more tiles on the screen, much like those provided by other software vendors. But SYSPRO has gone one step further and made those tiles active (they refresh dynamically as data changes) and touch controlled (touch a bar or a wedge on a pie chart to drill down for more detail). They can be presented on any device, using any mobile platform and can be extensively personalized or customized.

These not-so-subtle differences are supported by the Microsoft standards on which the software is based and the use of HTML5 and XML, which might not mean much to your average business executive. But more importantly, these differences come from its intimate relationship with its customers, knowing how they think and what they want.

Customization versus Configuration

"Customizing" ERP can mean many different things and today configuration is often confused with customization. As noted in [ERP, The Next Generation: The Final Frontier](#), customization used to mean mucking around in source code, resulting in hard-coded logic that was difficult to change. Source code modifications also made it difficult to keep up with updates and upgrades offered by your ERP vendor. If you couldn't take advantage of innovation delivered, you were essentially letting some of your maintenance dollars go to waste. And as ERP (and your competitors) moved forward, you were stuck.

But SYSPRO has long stayed ahead of the pack when it comes to configuration rather than customization. SYSPRO introduced the concept of UI-centric power tailoring several years before this type of configuration capability became mainstream. It knew its customers didn't have big budgets for customization and didn't want to leave them stranded on older versions as new innovation was delivered.

In spite of being a relatively small company, Vann Spices serves very large customers and hence has the same ERP requirements of a large manufacturer. Yet it doesn't have the deep pockets of a large company. Mick Whitlock believes

this is one reason why SYSPRO ERP can satisfy those needs. "The user interface is incredibly easy to use and tailor to our specific needs. It feels just like we built it specifically for our own company and our own purposes."

More Innovation, Easier Integration

More innovation implies more features and functions. But an extended functional footprint isn't what makes any ERP "next generation". The underlying technology infrastructure does. While business executives often know little and care less about the underlying technology, they do care about the value it brings. And it is that technology that also aids in accelerating the development of new features and functions.

When SYSPRO first introduced its next generation ERP, it also introduced the concept of business objects, modern component architecture and a separate presentation layer. It is not important for the typical business user to understand this from a purely technical perspective. The crew of the Enterprise didn't necessarily understand how chief engineer Scott's transporter beam worked. But each and every crewmember knew what it did and what "Beam me up, Scottie" meant. Every businessperson using ERP needs to understand what technology can bring to the ERP party or the potential will remain vastly unrealized.

Presentation Layer

By separating the presentation layer from the source code, modifications can be made without impacting the rest of the system (think different languages, company-specific terminology, adding removing fields from a screen, etc.).

Business Objects

If you are not sure what a business object might be: In the context of ERP, a customer is a business object. But as a business object, a customer isn't just a record in a master file. It also includes the maintenance functions, validation and controls.

Component Architecture

SYSPRO has coupled business objects with modern component architecture in order to be able to develop reusable building blocks on which additional SYSPRO modules or even custom applications can be built. If you need to add a customer relationship management (CRM) solution to SYSPRO ERP, you don't need to create an entirely new (and different) customer master or programs to maintain it. You simply re-use the existing object. And you bolt the new CRM solution onto your existing ERP in such a way that it all looks, feels and behaves like a single integrated solution. Indeed SYSPRO offers CRM and it looks and behaves as an integral part of the broader solution.

But if you don't need CRM (yet), ERP will not suffer from its not being there. You still have your customer master file and all the functions necessary to maintain it. Or perhaps you already have a different CRM. It is not unusual for small companies to invest in CRM even before a full-blown ERP solution. If you need to integrate with another third party application, as long as that other application can map to standard business objects, it too can be easily bolted on, data is synchronized and redundancy is reduced or eliminated. The same is true for any new custom-developed applications.

SYSPRO Release 7 includes new functionality, beyond the added features and flexibility of the new user interface. Release 7 builds on this flexibility by also including industry templates. Those in medical device industries might want to see the lot and/or serial number on every screen. But unless you are in the food industry, you don't want to see specific gravity or fat content. SYSPRO partners can pre-design the layout for an electronics manufacturer or a food processor. Or customers can fashion their own "customized" screens.

Achieving Warp Speed

To conquer the final frontier of ERP you need speed. The USS Enterprise had at its disposal amazing technology that allowed the starship to travel at warp speed, using a hypothetical faster-than-light propulsion system. While SYSPRO ERP can't travel faster than the speed of light, the installation and upgrade processes have been re-engineered to move customers to this newest release faster, often in "one click".

Once there, Release 7 has been enhanced for faster transaction throughput, supporting large transaction volumes and massive amounts of data from sensors, mobile devices and other external sources. Today these massive volumes must be structured but SYSPRO intends to include unstructured data (think [Hadoop](#)) in the future.

Summary

Star Trek was and is science fiction. To many, modern technology-enabled solutions might still seem the stuff of science fiction when in fact they are in production environments, producing results that are nothing short of amazing. What generation of ERP are you running today? Have you explored the world of very real possibilities recently? If not, are you missing out and losing ground in terms of competitive advantage?

Next generation ERP from SYSPRO is very real. If you are faced with the accelerating pace of business, growing volumes of data and higher customer expectations, but your current ERP solution has you stuck in the 20th century, maybe it is time to explore the final frontier. Consider joining the federation of SYSPRO customers for a new and improved ERP experience.

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