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Beware big vendors if you care about viability

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Tags: Brand & Digital Asset Management, Document Management (ECM), Enterprise Collaboration & Social Software, Enterprise Search, Portals & Content Integration, Web Content & Experience Management, Selecting Technology, Vendor Viability & Financials, Content Analytics with Enterprise Search

When I was a pup in the enterprise technology industry, I noticed that some of the best solutions came from smaller vendors. Upon hearing this, my elders would pull me aside and say, "sure, but how much longer will

that vendor be around?"

That's a hard argument to counter, because of course everyone harbors fears about their vendors' viability. Statistically, most small businesses fail. Software vendors are no different, and who wants to get stuck with an unsupported product? In the wake of the dot-com bust, the old canard, "no one ever got fired for recommending IBM" got replaced with, "at least we know IBM isn't *going away* any time soon."

Two decades and much gray hair later, I've come to the conclusion that the very biggest vendors can actually carry the highest risks in terms of product continuity. IBM, Microsoft, Oracle, EMC, Google, and SAP aren't going to fail as companies, but they will kill individual products at the drop of the hat. Remember they are constantly buying other vendors, and their own product strategies can shift quickly, due to staff turnover, equity market shifts, or simple faddishness, to which the biggest players are especially susceptible.

I was reminded of this yesterday when Apoorv pointed out that IBM has quietly announced that it will stop marketing its Omnifind Yahoo Edition (OYE) search engine, and discontinue support next year. IBM has had a tendency to proliferate different search technologies across its various product lines, so perhaps this sort of rationalization makes sense. Except it may not make sense for those customers who bought into OYE when IBM made a big splash with it four years ago. Replacing search technologies is no trivial effort.

I could cite similar examples from all the other big vendors mentioned above.

Smaller vendors, especially those focused on one tool, are staking their corporate lives on their offering. Their product could still weaken over time -- and as a customer you need to stay on top of innovation and support levels -- but you typically won't see a capricious decision to discontinue it outright.

Could your small, focused vendor go kaput? Sure. Can open source projects wither? Absolutely. It's always possible. I've learned to look at viability and continuity as a multi-dimensional challenge, and our evaluation research for each of the 200 solutions we cover analyzes the challenge from several perspectives, to give you the broadest possible picture of your risks.

In the end, though, if stability is a high priority, the biggest vendors may not present your best choice.

Excerpt from the Content Analytics with Enterprise Search Evaluation

Enterprise Search Evaluation Stream looks at... IBM: OmniFind Enterprise Edition

"Characteristically, IBM finds itself awash in good technology, but challenged by more prosaic matters involving product-line integration. Yet, there is progress to report. ..."
(p. 116)

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