

Ideal Applications - Can a One Size Fits All Approach Work?

A recent visit to Essen Security trade show highlighted the numerous software applications now available for IP security systems. From simple graphical interfaces to feature rich Vista like presentations the choice is rapidly increasing as more and more of the market switch on to the advantages and now clear cost savings of IP systems.

However more choice means you require more time to properly evaluate each option to ensure the features cover all aspects of your installation. From wandering round the trade show you find nearly all the applications offer the same or similar feature sets however only a few of them offer the features in a way best suited to a customer's particular circumstance. A one size fits all approach can lead to

troublesome installations, and a less than intuitive user experience as the customer struggles to make some features fit their needs while ignore others that are not applicable to them, resulting in higher investment in training and in some cases more manual intervention than should be necessary to maintain the solution. Ultimately leading to a higher total cost of ownership.

Codestuff have been developing applications for our partners for some time now and in fact have developed several of the applications on show at Essen. Over this time we have created an application framework that ensures the applications we develop have core features that lead to simple installation, simple operation and low maintenance costs.



■ Installation

Often a topic completely omitted from initial evaluation and only ever skimmed over in marketing material. An intuitive and simple installation process can be the difference between on time project completion and a possible costly delayed handover. Installation of all system components should always be handled by the now common place installation wizards. However the installation process does not stop there. How easy is it to add a camera to the system? How easy is it to add 200 cameras to the system? From experience we have found this process can severely delay the installation process and therefore it is worth considering from the beginning how easy it is to add cameras, configure recording, setup alarms, add / remove users, etc. When evaluating any product it is worth asking for a demonstration of how setups are maintained and modified.

■ Upgrading

No matter how good a fit the application is to the project requirements it is most likely that the software will need upgrading at some point. If not to provide additional functionality or fix issues, then to recover from hardware failure. The ability to export the complete configuration and then import this to the same or upgraded version of the application is a must for any system requiring high availability.

Attention should also be given to the availability of media data after an upgrade or re-installation. Often major application upgrades will result in incompatible media files that will require conversion.

A particular problem associated with hardware failure is the reuse of the software licenses. It is very convenient for all parties to provide software licensing based on the signature of the installed hardware. However this convenience should not result in licenses being lost should the hardware fail.

■ Usability

Everyone is impressed by the visually pleasing user interfaces being offered today, partially promoted by the popularity of Windows Media Player and the new Windows Vista interface. These interfaces should not get in the way of delivering the application features. An application interface should always be considered in the context of use and with the mindset of the ultimate end user. A flashy visualisation of say the export process may impress at a trade show however this is of little use in a real situation where bulk export without frills would greatly speed the review process.

The same is also true for many mapping systems. A fully scalable and three dimensional mapping system looks very impressive but what costs are involved in producing and maintaining these maps? More importantly will the operator benefit from this functionality?

■ Compatibility

It really doesn't need to be said that today, any modern application needs to support multiple camera manufacturers. Side to a few specialist manufacturers almost all protocols are either open or made available under NDA to application developers. This ensures that each monitored location can be specified with the hardware most suited to that location regardless of the manufacturer.

Compatibility with transitional technology such as IP based DVR devices should also be considered. In new installations DVRs can still have a role to play and a system that integrates both DVR and IP cameras can be very cost effective. This should also be considered if the customer has any plans for expansion by acquisition where legacy technology may need to be brought under control by the software application in the future.

It's also worth understanding how active the application developers are in adding new devices and what the feature and technology roadmap is for the future. This market is developing so quickly that today's applications can quickly become obsolete and discontinued.

■ Conclusion

The process of purchasing a security management suite is very involved and I can only touch the surface in an article such as this. The team at Codestuff will gladly help resolve any issues you have and possibly point you in the direction of one of our customers' developments that will satisfy your needs. We'd also like to hear from you if you can't find an off the shelf offering and require a custom solution.