Making Connections

All-in-One or Best-of-Breed?

By Andrew Sieja, Founder and CEO, kCura

All-in-one or best-in-breed? A single software suite or a number of point solutions unified together to operate as a cohesive solution?

These two questions have been hotly debated in the e-discovery tech industry for years. E-discovery has many steps, and each step requires software in order to execute. As each part of the process is conducted, the individual pieces of information flow from stage to stage.

Some believe that an all-in-one solution is the cleanest and most practical approach in implementing an end-to-end e-discovery solution, asserting that the transfer of data between software solutions to manage the collection, processing and review of data can be cumbersome and error-prone. Others treat each stage of e-discovery as a distinct business process, requiring software that is sophisticated enough to meet the unique needs of each scenario. It's a demanding process, and they value the quick and easy implementation of new innovations that may not fit snugly into an existing all-in-one solution.

So how is e-discovery different than any other technology solution? We see a lot of all-in-one solutions out there, offering one product for all aspects of a process, but when we take a look at what other ubiquitous office technologies do, we often see best-of-breed implementation.

Take email, for example, as it is deployed at kCura. When an email comes in, it first passes through our spam filter—in this case, Google's Postini. From there, the email enters our Microsoft Exchange server, where it's scanned for viruses using Trend Micro antivirus protection. At that point, our employees are checking their email using desktop computers via Outlook, and their iPods, BlackBerrys and iPhones—and finally the email is archived to Google's Gmail. It doesn't take one, but many, best-of-breed solutions to create an efficient and effective email system.

Both the all-in-one and best-of-breed approaches manifest themselves in e-discovery, and they serve a range of unique purposes based on customer need.

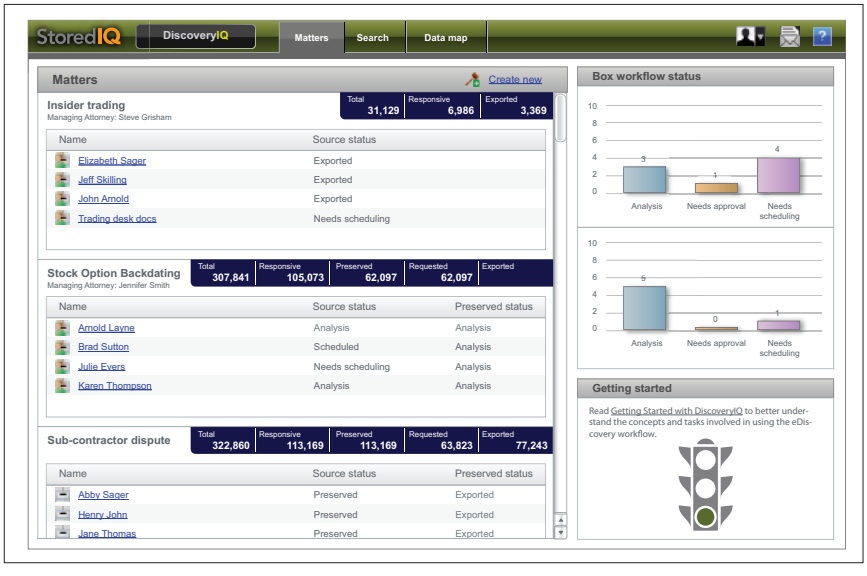
Two Approaches Examined

All-in-one highlights. For many, a single solution can be easier to use. Users can log into a single console and not have to worry about transferring data between components. This solution's primary appeal is avoiding the movement of big data in multiple ways, where errors could potentially be introduced if the transition isn't automated.

Assuming that the all-in-one solution is built well—meaning that each component of the larger process speaks to the surrounding components effectively—there's a deployment benefit of an all-in-one solution. Again, there's one single system being implemented, so the challenges surrounding deployment can be mitigated. There still may be a number of complexities, but those are more evident on a case-by-case basis.

From a vendor management perspective, the process is fairly streamlined. All-in-one solutions mean you're licensing a single solution from a single vendor. There's one contract, one payment, and—for better or worse—one person you go to when the technology isn't functioning effectively. There's the opportunity to build a single relationship, rather than developing rapport with a range of companies who may have different styles of customer support.

Best-of-breed highlights. In terms of advantages, a best-of-breed approach provides a level of speed and agility to innovate that's tough to maintain in an all-in-one solution. An extendable platform with easily adapted APIs means new solutions can be built quickly and deployed more rapidly by vendors, customers and third-party software providers. For example, when StoredIQ's customers asked for a seamless way to integrate the developer's case tracking and analysis tool into our review tool, StoredIQ was able to build an integration and offer it to the public in a matter of weeks, utilizing a software developer's kit and adjusting the integration along the way based on immediate feedback received from their clients.



How StoredIQ allows users to tie identification, collection and preservation directly to processing and review.

Andrew Sieja

Andrew Sieja founded kCura in February, 2001. During his tenure as president and CEO, he has transformed the group from a consulting firm to a software company providing e-discovery solutions for the legal community. Prior to kCura, Sieja was a senior consultant at Lante, an e-business consulting firm, where he led development and was a project manager working with clients such as Microsoft. From 1995 to 1999, Andrew served as a Messaging System Architect for Siemens, where he was responsible for their North American messaging infrastructure.

Additionally, it can be a challenge for an all-in-one vendor to be excellent in each stage of e-discovery, as each phase of the EDRM brings with it a new set of requirements and desires. Customers also have very different needs for each of these phases. Depending on the nature of the firm, and how it practices e-discovery, some firms may require more robust capabilities for each part of the e-discovery process at different times, and this can be solved via several different best-of-breed applications. Costs are also a benefit here, as firms can distribute their resources accordingly. If they need to invest in a top review tool, but don't need much in the way of collection, they can spend more in the areas they deem the most vital.

Lastly, technology moves fast. The industry is growing and new products cannibalize existing products on a regular basis. Tools can become obsolete quickly, so being able to swap out technology components with something newer or better that leverages the most up-to-date technology can be valuable.

It should be clear that this approach will only work if the integration between products is supported by their vendors. Data transfer needs to be automated in order to ensure an effective process.

"Platform" as a Development Mantra

If you take the best-of-breed approach and center these applications around a single hub application, you're now looking at your technology in a different light. It has become a platform, which—for the sake of this article—we'll define as a piece of technology that is extendable, for which one is able to build (a.) point-solution applications that sit on top of the platform to fulfill specific needs; and (b.) integrations between existing technologies and the software.

The platform idea may make sense as a development mantra for helping customers, as it highlights response time and flexibility as ideal characteristics. Also, in the growing e-discovery space, it will only benefit customers to have choices. When you're evaluating everything from costs and ROI to flexibility and speed, there's much value added by choice. The flexibility of a platform provides choice in the same way: if you have a series of tasks you hope to complete using your e-discovery software, knowing that it's a quick adjustment to either buy an existing application, build your own application, or hire an outside firm to build an application for you is beneficial.

Holding the platform concept as a development mantra for vendors keeps development nimble. Teams can work closely to deploy applications to meet specific needs. When a company that values the platform concept as their mantra gets a series of requests from users asking that the company's software develop "feature A," there's a great chance feature A is going to be introduced sooner than later, even outside of a standard development cycle since standalone applications are an option. Overall, the platform concept makes a development cycle fast and effective, where teams can focus on building the core product while easily incorporating one-off applications into their roadmap as needs dictate.

There are also tangential benefits from a platform growing in industry adoption. What a platform approach does well is extend the utility and value of a single tool for customers in important ways. As the platform's user base grows, it attracts other developers who may want to integrate their product with yours for the sake of tapping into that user base. Now, because that developer is connected to the initial tool, more customers are attracted to the combined platform, as it offers best-of-breed solutions in two different areas. That, in turn, attracts more developers, and the cycle continues. We've seen this with Apple, as they build their own mobile hub, where each new product brings new Apple customers to the table, who in turn request even greater technologies and better products.

Doing More with a Technology Platform

Our industry is growing fast, if any of the recent e-discovery reports within the last two years are accurate. According to Gartner's 2011 Magic Quadrant for E-Discovery, the e-discovery industry will likely see "a five-year compound annual growth rate of approximately 14%, which means the total [software vendor revenue] should reach $1.5 billion in 2013." There's a lot of customer demand out there, and they want to do more with their investments.

For example, Dallas-based law firm Thompson & Knight has built a range of applications on top of their review tool—everything from project management to contract organization tools—and it has allowed the firm's litigation support department to offer point solutions for different practice groups throughout their firm. One application built by the litigation support team has allowed attorneys to track health plans, treatments and payments regarding a health insurance matter—collections of more than $30 million managed in a single application built in house. It has even freed up IT resources at Thompson & Knight. By leveraging their existing software as a platform, Thompson & Knight's litigation support group can provide the types of project databases that, in the past, have tied up valuable IT resources in SharePoint for days.

As our industry grows, and more players enter the realm of e-discovery, it may become increasingly important to have the ability to tie new tools together and build point solutions within that tool. Users are going to continue looking for the best technology to conduct e-discovery, particularly technology that can keep up with the industry's rapid changes. ▮

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Recognized as a "leader" in Gartner's 2011 E-Discovery Magic Quadrant, kCura are the developers of the e-discovery software Relativity, a Web-based platform for the review, analysis and production of electronic data.