

THE DEATH OF THE AMS*

*Association Management System

-OR-

How I Learned to Stop Expecting an Eierlegende WollMilchSau

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Executive Summary

OK, I will admit to perhaps a bit of hyperbole in my title.
But my point is a serious one.

For the past 20 years, if you ran an association of any note, odds are that its central nervous system was an Association Management System (AMS).

Over the years, you likely spent more and more effort to get “everything” into the AMS, because it was critically important to get all of your member information into one place so that you had a “complete” view of the member.

All of that is about to change.

Viewed another way, if you were starting a modestly sized association or non-profit today – say 30-40 people and \$5 to \$10 million in revenues – would an AMS be at the core and be your “system of record?”

Be honest.

3 Truths About My Association Career

Truth # 1

I have been employed in the association/non-profit space for 35 years.

This is a statement that many of my friends and colleagues from outside DC or Chicago or New York find hard to understand.

They usually say things like,

“You volunteered for 35 years?”

“What do you do for a full-time job?”

Yes, 35 years, spread across 3 associations:

1. the Public Affairs Council (the professional association for public affairs professionals;
2. the American Electronics Association (once the leading high tech association -- now defunct, a sad story); and
3. AIIM, the Association for Information and Image Management.

Truth #2

I love the weird world of non-profits, a strange amalgam of the very strategic and the very tactical.

Closer to the end of my career than the beginning, I sometimes wonder how on earth I wound up in this unusual world of Board meetings and members and constantly worrying about what portion of our core business will be disintermediated next. By a rough reckoning, I have been the CEO or a primary staff person for about 100 quarterly Board meetings over the years, which is more than any sane person should confess to.

But all that said, I love this strange career that has allowed me to be involved with some awesome and inspiring people and has allowed me to indulge my interest in technology for over 25 years -- despite being an economics and history major. In presentations to college kids, I tell them that there is no better place to learn an industry or profession than in an association.

There is also no more interesting combination of the extremely strategic and the incredibly tactical. I remember a keynote presentation I was doing for a large technology company user conference a few years back. A presentation like this usually requires 5 or 6 conference calls with multiple tiers of people to make sure that the "message" is right. At the end of one of these series of calls, the person at the other end exclaimed, "OK, now that we have the story right, let us know who your PowerPoint person is and we'll have our PowerPoint people work with yours." Uhhh...You're talking to him.

Truth #3

My love affair with technology goes back a long way.

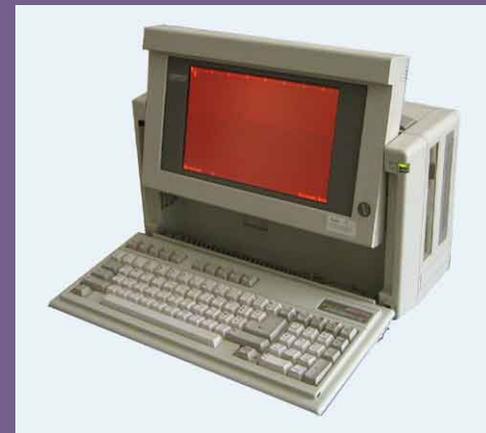


My first association computer was an MAI/Basic 4 at the Public Affairs Council. I can't confirm this, but I am almost positive that it had a four platter set of magnetic drives inside a case the size of a small ottoman, and each platter held 10 megs of storage.



From there I went to AEA, under the mistaken assumption that I would be exposed to the latest in high tech gear. Two or three of us shared an HP-125, which I swear took about 2 minutes to alphabetize and merge a list of about 50 names.

From there, off to the world of portable computing. And the COMPAQ 2 (the green screen one), followed shortly by the COMPAQ 3 (the orange screen one). I actually took the COMPAQ 3 on airplanes in order to be able to play a game called Leisure Suit Larry.



Enter the AMS

Somewhere along the way, I became acquainted with the world of Association Management Systems.

Truth in advertising -- At various times I have been an iMIS customer, a CGI/Aptify customer, and an Avector customer.

Over the last 20 years, across a wide variety of vendors and associations, I have either participated in or led processes that looked something like this:

1. Somebody decides you need a new AMS. (Note: This same person often strongly denies ownership once the following steps commence.)
2. You go through an exhaustive requirements definition process -- most likely led by an external consultant -- trying to find an AMS that does things EXACTLY like you do.
3. Once you pick a platform, you then customize it to match your unique way of doing business because no other association on the planet could POSSIBLY be like yours.

4. You then extend the platform through massive expensive customizations to get it to do additional things that it was never designed to do.
5. The AMS company ultimately builds this new functionality into a new version and announces an upgrade.
6. You skip the upgrade because you haven't even digested #2 and #3.
7. After going through the above cycle a couple of times, you decide to upgrade to the current version, only to discover that the "upgrade" is actually just about as complex and costly as a brand new implementation.
8. After a couple of cycles of this, either the IT guy or the CEO gets fired (or both) and you go back to #1.

Over the years, I can testify that we in the association community have asked our AMS systems to be learning management systems. And certification systems. And accounting systems. And web content management systems. And multi-currency financial systems. And "community" platforms. And publishing systems. And event management systems. And conference systems. And email marketing systems. And...and...and...

In my own industry -- the content management industry, or CMS industry -- we have been down this path. During the early 2000s, the leading vendors bought up countless small companies with specific functionality they didn't have and ultimately integrated these acquisitions into a suite of "pre-integrated" products in order to minimize customer frustration with incompatible products. All of this occurred at a relatively high price point, at the risk of being dependent on a single vendor, and with some sacrifice in functionality, but with the benefit that stuff basically worked. And this carried with it the core underlying objective that there was benefit in getting all of an organization's content into one single place and one single system.

Now all this worked fairly well in the CMS space until the twin tsunamis of SharePoint and consumer technologies hit the CMS marketplace. And very quickly, price points collapsed and the industry lurched toward a collection of best of breed products, with an emphasis on federating the control of information and access to it across multiple repositories and applications rather than dragging all of it into a single repository.

There's actually a German word for this tendency to add more and more functionality into a single system (there always is a German word for everything) -- Eierlegende WollmilchSau. Per Germany.info, "an Eierlegende Wollmilchsau is a single tool or a person that attempts to do the work of many, like a jack of all trades or the literal egg-laying wool-milk-sow."



We've asked our Association Management Systems to become Eierlegende WollMilchSau -- the perfect farm animal, uniting the qualities of chickens (laying eggs), sheep (producing wool), cows (giving out milk) and pigs (can be turned into bacon).

Eierlegende WollMilchSau

For the past decade we have all claimed in our RFPs that we wanted to get “everything” into the AMS; never mind what “everything” now actually means in an era of exploding data.

“Let’s make the AMS our single system of record!” we all shouted from the barricades.

“Let’s create ‘engagement’ scores based on all of the information and processes housed in the AMS and use them to predict future!”

“Let’s make sure we get every single snippet of information into the AMS, no matter whether we will every be able to do anything with the information or not!”

We pushed the AMS vendors to add functionality and they responded with an overflowing set of “modules.” The competitiveness of these modules is proving impossible to sustain in an era of consumerization.

This entire concept is irrelevant in an era of massive consumerization and technology disruption. We will never get “all” of the information about customer and member engagement into a single system. No AMS application “module” will ever be as good as a dedicated best of breed application, often battle hardened in the consumer space.

No one wants an Eierlegende Wollmilchsau anymore. Finding such an AMS is as impossible as finding the mythical creature. The traditional AMS is dead.

So what do you want, smart guy?

I think it is time to rethink how we look at the information management systems we use to run our associations.

If I were starting over, what would be my core assumptions?

#1 – Never buy on-premise software.

#2 – Never buy servers.

#3 – Find the easiest and cheapest off the shelf cloud based consumer solution you can to do email and document management and collaboration (both inside and outside the firewall) and don't look back. Just pick one.

#4 – Identify the core “things” you need to do as an organization. This would likely include the following:

- ✓ Marketing automation – how do you tell people what you're up to in a way that does not subject them to email carpet bombing and identify those who wish to do more?
- ✓ Sales management – how do you take the people who have indicated a desire to do more, and route them through a sales funnel?

- ✓ Web content management – how do you deliver web experiences and content and value that are equivalent to what members can experience in their personal lives?
- ✓ Event management – how do you organize events, register people for them, and badge them?
- ✓ Learning management – how do you take people on educational journeys, and measure their progress through those journeys?
- ✓ Community management – how do you connect your customers with you and with each other – both in internal and public networks?
- ✓ Membership management – how do you keep track of who is a member and what kind of member are they?
- ✓ Publications management – how do you publish stuff?
- ✓ Financial management – how do you collect money, keep track of it, and produce financials?

#5 – Think about whether you can combine any of the above.

#6 – Think about how these processes need to connect. But don't do this abstractly or you will conclude that EVERYTHING needs to connect with everything. Do it in the context of business processes, and have the *business owner* define the connections.

#7 – Identify the best solutions to do each, *regardless of whether they are in the "association business."* Do not even consider any system for any of the above that is not designed to work on any device, any place. And I don't mean a web interface that is viewable on a mobile phone if you are willing to put up with one point font sizes. I mean only select systems with user experiences that are responsive on any device. And make "appropriateness" of the solution to your organization (a 30 person organization just can't handle the same kinds of systems complexity as a 300 person organization) one of your main criteria.

#8 – If some of these processes are best run through an AMS, fabulous. In that case, long live the AMS. But don't consider the AMS as the sun in a solar system of process "planets," sucking all of the data from each of the planets back into a single system of record. Think about the AMS as *one of the planets*, go back to #6, and define how the *data* in each of the planets needs to connect. But leave most of the data likely residing in the planet in which it does the most good. The point is to connect the data, NOT to connect everything to the AMS.

I know. Easier said than done.

But unless we all collectively start thinking about this problem differently, we will wind up in the same place.

Haven't we all suffered long enough with proprietary systems that are extraordinarily expensive to integrate?

Let's start a conversation about how we in the association community can move out of the slow-moving backwaters of the IT world. We've all got important work to do – work the world needs. How we can move away from systems that look like “state of the art 2001” and work only on PCs? [Note: I actually said this recently to a leading AMS provider and no one argued!]

If we don't change how we look at technology – and if the CEO and the business doesn't lead this challenge -- how on earth are we going to be able to compete with the onslaught of consumerization, cloud and mobile, and the Internet of Things?

If we think we almost got dis-intermediated out of existence with the web, we haven't seen anything yet.

The AMS is Dead. Let's start thinking about this problem differently.

About Me

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I'm a frequent keynote speaker on Digital Transformation and the struggle to overcome Information Chaos. I blog under the title Digital Landfill and have almost 10,000 Twitter followers (my to the puzzlement of my wife). I've published seven e-book titles including "Information Chaos v. Information Opportunity" (<http://www.aiim.org/infochaos>), "#OccupyIT — A Technology Manifesto for Cloud, Mobile and Social Era" and the popular "8 Things You Need to Know About" e-book series. And I wrote a children's book 10 years ago for my kids that has total sales slowly creeping into triple digits.

About AIIM

(<http://www.aiim.org>)

We believe that the information systems we use at work should be simple, secure, and available anywhere, anytime, and on any device. Our mission is to improve organizational performance by empowering a community of leaders committed to information-driven innovation.

We help individuals and organizations improve their performance in three ways: 1) Skills Development; 2) Expert Advice; and 3) Market Research.

We're especially happy to help fellow association and non-profit types. Give us a call.