

## Can you evolve data standards through bottom-up data integration?

Reference data makes up a hugely important layer in the total make up of an enterprise's data and yet most organizations, industries and projects continue to rely on the use of spreadsheets to manage their coded values and classifications. This is a relatively minor issue at a local application level but once you add in multiple systems, locations and data standards, it really opens up the cost, risk and governance challenges which regularly lead to delays or even project failure.

### The challenge of having competing data standards

There are many and varied data standards that exist across all industry sectors and governments. Trying to make sense of competing standards across diverse applications is a tough ask and many projects fail before they even get started, due to an inability to agree to which standards to adopt.

The real barrier to integration projects is the spiraling cost of data design and system replacement, driven by a need to agree and enforce a single 'Top Down' standard or alternatively building multiple, complex interfaces. Then, having consolidated the data, there is the challenge relating to maintaining the integrity of the underlying reference data. What if standards change? What if we buy another company – how do we integrate that data quickly and efficiently?

Many of these challenges exist because more new standards continue to be developed every day. Typically, each time a company implements an application they create their own, unique code list structures and the main reason they can't find all the data standards they need, is because they are not made available as part of the application, or worse still, both. They then rely on internal teams to create other unique drop down lists with little reference to existing systems or future plans, and so the problem proliferates.

### So why don't all vendors provide reference data standards with their applications?

Take CRM for example – there are many solutions out there but how many are provided with basic entries for drop down tables? It doesn't have to be world changing in terms of content but by providing a few simple options such as country codes, customer types and regions, we begin to start building data standards from the bottom up.

Take that initiative one step further and provide a means to distribute changes to more volatile or fast changing classifications such as vehicle make/models, and we create a means to maintain data quality and integrity across user communities. Before long we will find standards evolving within applications and industry or ideally both.

### Mapping competing standards together

Today we still have to deal with reality and that is managing the plethora of competing standards across diverse applications. Whilst we wait for the 'evolving' standards to surface we still have to be able to make sense of it all and manage the traditional data integration requirements.

The solution is also really straightforward – why not map the competing standards together and create machine readable output for data manipulation tools to use as a translation aid. The complexity and variety of interfaces used to perform back record conversion and maintain data integrity is significantly reduced. With all the classifications and mappings in one place, the whole process becomes a relatively minor exercise rather than a complex, costly procedure.

The positive impact of being able to embrace and make sense of competing standards is massive. Take NATO product codes for example, used by thousands of suppliers who all have different product codes on internal systems, central government procurement teams needing to better understand where similar

products and services exist from supplier offerings, financial markets with classifications such as trade codes and legal entity identifiers. Many variants and all meaning the same that are similar but different!

### **Will this approach work?**

Well, if in doubt, take a look at the [Police National Database project](#) in the United Kingdom. The effort to map all similar reference data standards across 200 applications has not been wasted by restricting the output to this single project.

Many other government departments are now re-using this shared reference data and mapping layer in order to help translate information from legacy and new applications.

For those suppliers who take the management of reference data seriously, the opportunity exists to create real value in their chosen markets and repeat the success that is evident in the UK criminal justice space.

The solution to managing reference data is simple:

- Embrace all standards across diverse applications
- Provide a means to join those standards together, and;
- Quickly overcome a number of traditional data migration challenges.

It's a tough ask to agree top down data standards for any project large or small and an even tougher ask to implement, but now there is an alternative option. Turn the problem on its head, evolve data standards from the bottom up and actually achieve results sooner, more efficiently and at a lower cost.

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