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The Grape Escape 2011 Roundup

by [Aleksey Osintsev](#)

Although this year Judith Rothrock could not attend herself, she's the driving force behind the annual JRocket Marketing Grape Escape® industry analyst event, now in its 11th year. As always, this year's Grape Escape was a well-organized event hosting some key industry players. It afforded me and my colleague Gabriel Gheorghiu another opportunity to meet the software vendors who are JRocket Marketing's clients and obtain the latest news and updates straight from the source.

Here's the skinny on three of the vendors that gave informal presentations.

Meridian Systems

[Meridian Systems](#) is a California-based project management software developer that focuses on project-based *architecture, engineering, and construction* (AEC) and infrastructure management businesses. It established itself in the *infrastructure lifecycle management* (ILM) market around 8 years ago and still maintains leading positions in both ILM and construction project management. The company is owned by Trimble Navigation, which ensures Meridian's financial stability and provides additional benefits by being a notable player on allied markets.

Meridian advocates the concept of combining the previously disconnected processes of construction project planning, building, and operating together into one single life cycle and offers software that fully supports that idea. Current realities, such as project globalization and the increasing acceptance of the *building information model* (BIM) concept, as well as the trends to favor renovation over construction and smaller-scale projects instead of large ones, dictate the industry rules. Meridian's Plan-Build-Operate strategy reflects these facts, holding BIM and ILM as its central pillars.

In light of this strategy, the recent acquisition by Trimble of the leading BIM technology developer [Tekla](#) (based in Finland) appears to be straightforward and logical. I expect that Meridian software will be fully integrated with Tekla in the future to make available a single BIM-based infrastructure management technology offering. In the meantime, Meridian customers have already started integrating BIM to ILM (Ryan Companies and Stanford Hospital & Clinics) while partnering with Tekla.

Meridian invests internationally to better serve various growing markets. It is now present in the Middle East supporting AECOM in its business initiatives to manage mega construction projects in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Offering a cloud-based deployment option for Prolog, its construction project management software, is another logical step. This option is called Prolog Sky and is available for both the

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Prolog Manager and Prolog Converge variations of the product. Software packages and deployment options bring lots of innovation to a market that is historically highly conservative and slow to adopt new technology. Coupled with BIM and *radio frequency identification* (RFID) technologies, the changes to the way the industry operates will be breathtaking.

We also had an interesting conversation with General Manager Geene Alhady and Director of Marketing Sue Watkins about the industry in general, BIM, and acceptance of new technology by construction companies. The topic is hot, and we'll continue to illuminate this subject in the future.

SYSPRO

SYSPRO, a Microsoft.net platform-based *enterprise resource planning* (ERP) solution provider, may be neither "the loudest nor largest" of the ERP solution vendors, but according to Brian Stein, chief executive officer (CEO) for SYSPRO USA, it offers the best value and is the most pragmatic and visionary choice for small- and midsize manufacturing and distribution businesses. With nearly 15,000 global customers, SYSPRO is a frequent award-winner in technology, service, and innovation categories, continually delivering highly satisfied customers to Grape Escape. SYSPRO's target markets are the food, medical devices, electronics, and machinery and equipment verticals where they have built out vertical-industry specific solutions, but the company has a solid footprint in other midsize market segments as well.

So, what's new for this year?

In accordance with SYSPRO's "[Einstein strategy](#)," last year's 6.1 release has been evolved and additional extended capabilities were added on three major veins: material control, cost control, and cash control. SYSPRO specifically focused its development around materials, cost, and cash management, since those are the functionalities most demanded by the client managers.

As for material management, users are able to manage material yield, optimize inventory, and get the benefit of using one system for manufacturing and distribution, and benefit from newer tailored visual dashboard views and reports.

Cost control functionality now provides tracking of cost-driving changes such as outsourcing and globalization, and energy costs; tailored reporting for comparing and contrasting vendor resources; cost management-enforced dashboards; "what-if" inventory optimization tools binding with the corresponding costs; embedded cost-cutting workflow mapping tools; and the capability to reflect a green footprint using general ledger statistical accounts.

The third group of enhancements is related to cash management—one of the key elements of managing a manufacturing or distribution company. SYSPRO's ERP provides clients with the following new features: short- and long-term cash flow control tools; renewed credit management functionality; tailored tools to plan and manage on-hand and invested cash; capability to directly link the software with financial institutions; extended analytical tools allowing drilling into rendering loans and acquisition details with more details; and green scorecard features.

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All these improvements were combined together under the go-to-market strategy called $S=MC^2$ —Expanded Materials, Cost Controls and Cash Management for SYSPRO Customers—recalling Einstein's well-known formula.

UNIT4

UNIT4 has always been quite inventive in identifying its products and concepts, and this year's announcements weren't an exception.

Known for being architecturally and conceptually different from other ERP and financial packages, UNIT4 promotes a concept of "embracing change." In a nutshell, their software products are usually designed and developed in such a way to easily accommodate a business change of any nature that their clients might face. It can be a compliance regulation change, a merger or acquisition, an accounting standards modification, or simply a change of the current business structure such as one that any viable business performs from time to time to increase its competitiveness. UNIT4 offers products that allow business users to routinely make any necessary changes in consultation with the relevant departments, usually without the involvement of IT professionals.

At this event, UNIT4 announced further movement within its "Business Living in Change" solution development strategy, called "UNIT4 Independence Strategy."

First, this includes the new "Destination: Control" release of Coda Financials software (or, technically, version 12). The financial system is expanding its offering, allowing three new layers of control: Bundled Control Framework, 10 new Power Controls, and 10 new Precision Controls, including various reporting and visibility functionality. Those features are a logical development out of the financial application targeting, according to Ton Dobbe, vice president of product marketing, "for independently minded chief financial officers (CFOs), who are seeking relief from 'one size fits all' solutions" and need a powerful instrument to merge financial data from numerous other systems.

Second, UNIT4 has introduced "Shared Journey," a cloud-based deployment option for either Agresso ERP or Coda Financials, intended as shared-service solutions for groups or organizations, like local or municipal governments, high education institutions, etc. that use the same functional service and, therefore, need a special software capable of delivering such functions. This business concept of sharing similar services between separate organizations is especially popular in Northern Europe, where there are many examples of successful implementations of this business model among municipal and regional governments of neighboring counties and boroughs that have shared payroll, accounts receivable and accounts payable systems, etc.

Obviously UNIT4 is targeting, among others, existing mid- to large-sized clients of two major players on the corporate software market—SAP and Oracle—that are facing issues with the high cost of implementing business-related changes. And it seems the company has achieved a certain success in this endeavor. Chris Farmer, chief information officer (CIO) of Halcrow, a large U.K. infrastructure planning, design, and management company—a client of UNIT4's flagship software, Agresso ERP, for 10 years—contributed some interesting evidence. The ease with which Halcrow

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made changes is really impressive; for instance, it eliminated five business groups and replaced them with a matrix of four sales regions and three global practice areas. The entire project took 6 months from inception to completion and it took only 3 people to make over 4 months. For a company that operates in 30 countries and employs 6,000 workers, this is an outstanding number.

Conclusion

Attending Grape Escape for the second time, we see how valuable and worthwhile this event is. Being able to communicate directly with source of information, obtain new contacts, and share opinions with colleagues in an informal environment never fails to generate new insights and ideas that we can deliver to our readers. Hope to meet again next year!

Aleksey Osintsev is a research analyst with TEC. His interests are broad and cover topics ranging from manufacturing and information technology to music and raising kids. He is an experienced optimist and highly appreciates a sense of humor.

TEC BLOG: <http://blog.technologyevaluation.com/blog/2011/08/16/the-grape-escape-2011-roundup/>

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