

Introduction of PDM software (Part 2)

The headache of making a choice

Many apparel companies recognise that lean organisational structures and growing quantities of data in product development can be effectively managed with product data management (PDM) software. In recent year it has become more and more difficult to maintain an overview of the programs because so many different solutions have entered the marketplace. This market overview discusses criteria to select a PDM program out of the vast choice.

In recent years PDM and PLM (Product Lifecycle Management) have become common terms in the clothing industry. More and more firms are implementing a PDM system for the administration and control of their data in product development. For firms who are looking for a suitable program, the choice is now much larger than only a few years ago. More and more new suppliers are pushing their way to the market. The table below gives a summary of the PDM programs that are currently used in the German and international markets by clothing companies.

What systems are there?

At first glance it is difficult to compare the various programs since they often offer very different solutions to similar problems. The first PDM programs in the late Eighties permitted administration

of electronic forms. Today's PDM solutions offer a lot more than that. New features are constantly being added. Both the competition between the suppliers and the demand of existing customers are driving the development forward. Several suppliers have brought newly developed programs with the most up-to-date technology to the market. Programs not specifically developed for the apparel industry can in principle be adapted to the clothing industry but to date, though only the Konfig CM from Auto-trol has played a significant role in that category. On the other hand, companies in related sectors such as the shoe industry are increasingly using PDM systems originally developed for clothing.

Another trend is growing internationalisation. Many software suppliers are widening their sales markets and their product range through collaboration and expansion. One example is the merger of

the Danish supplier Runtime with the Canadian group Geac. As well as opening their own branches abroad, many software suppliers have established a network of partnerships with external service providers (such as agencies and consultants) that support the implementation and maintenance of customers in countries such as Turkey or China. In general a German and English program interface is the standard setup and many programs offer further language options.

Standard or individual solution?

The implementation of customers' requirements can in principle be achieved in two different ways. At one end of the spectrum are programs that have preset standard features that can be configured to customer requirements. At the other end are PDM solutions that can be «tailored» to each

customer. The most flexible of those programs allow a customer-specific data model in combination with the possibility of creating special input masks. Many programs are constructed in a modular fashion so that the customer only needs to purchase the functionalities required.

For a small business, a configurable solution that can be implemented without great expense is more suitable. The larger the company and the more complex the organisational structure, the more interesting an individual PDM variant becomes. Companies with their own IT specialists can then help to determine the program design and for instance program their own functions.

In order to meet the requirements of the whole range of companies from a few PDM users to several hundred users, some PDM providers also offer different variants of their products. Entry into PDM might be made easier for customers with a reduced-spec version of a program. This can be upgraded into a full PDM version later. Often these «light versions» are sold in combination with other software. TEX-DESIGN Form Edition from Koppermann and Mikalis from Lectra for instance deliver with each PDM licence a licence for the company's own drawing program.

Future development

One of the latest trends in the development of PDM programs is to integrate sophisticated planning tools. For example collection planning functionality can include charts where users define their product group structure with colours and price ranges and assign also tasks to departments or single users. Checks for work in

Market Overview of Product Data Management (PDM) Programs for Clothing Companies

Program	(current version)	Product Introduction	Supplier	Clothing-Specific	Program Adaptation	Main Target Group			Operating System
						up to 5	up to 50	over 50	
C.D.S	(2.5)	2001	Porini	• • •	• •			•	
Gallery	(V2.3)	2000	Lectra	• •	• •			• ¹	
Konfig CM	(7.0)	2003	Auto-trol Technology	• •				• • • ¹	
pdm.assist	(4.0)	2001	assist Gesellschaft für Automatisierung und Systeme	• • •	• •			•	
PolyOrganize	(5.9v2)	1989	Polytropon Automation Systems	• • •	• •			• • • ²	
Product Manager	(2)	2003	Freeborders	• • •	• •			• • • ²	
ProTechnik	(7.x)	1999	Speed Step	• • •	• •			•	
Quest PLM/PDM	(3.7.4)	1992	Geac Enterprise Solutions/Runtime	• • •	• •			•	
TEX-DEFINE Enterprise	(4.1)	1995	Koppermann Computersysteme	• • •	• •			•	
useFELIXfashion/pdm	(3.4)	1998	SIC Software Industrie Consult	• • •	• •			•	
WebPDM	(4.1.28)	1996	Gerber Technology	• • •	• •			•	
WP-Model	(3.2.1)	1995	W+P Solutions	• • •	• •			•	

Program adaptation: • Individual data model possible
 • Configurable data model
 • Individual input masks possible

Operating system required for the application software: • Windows
 • Mac OS
 • All other

¹ = Via web browser: Internet Explorer/Netscape
² = Via web browser: Internet Explorer

progress remind users by email about completing these tasks. To allow clients to plan their increasingly complex development processes in detail, some suppliers now incorporate existing workflow software into their PDM systems in order to manage such processes by methods tried and tested in the field.

This development has already occurred in a similar way in the integration of image material. Today the user can easily edit drawings from within the PDM application and most PDM programs support common standard drawing programs such as Corel Draw or Adobe Illustrator. Customers can continue to use familiar graphics software when introducing new PDM software.

This trend of seamlessly integrating existing specialised software will continue in the next few years. Software companies with a broad suite of products will lead this development.

For Windows and Apple Macintosh

While a few years ago PDM programs supported a variety of operating systems, today all applications run with the common Windows technology. The Poly-Organize program is cross platform for both Macintosh and Windows PC's. The Konfig CM and Product Manager programs function via a web interface and a standard internet browser serves as client. Therefore several operating systems are supported. This is also theoretically possible with other systems if a PDM web module is used. However in many cases the function of the web module is not as extensive as that of a conventional client installed on the user's PC.

Companies named

<i>assyst</i>	www.assyst-intl.com
<i>Auto-trol</i>	www.auto-trol.com
<i>Freeborders</i>	www.freeborders.com
<i>Gerber</i>	www.gerberetechnology.com
<i>Koppermann</i>	www.koppermann.com
<i>Lectra</i>	www.lectra.com
<i>Polytropon Automation Systems</i>	www.polytropon.com
<i>Porini Srl.</i>	www.nedgraphics-porini.com
<i>Runtime BV</i>	www.runtime.geac.com
<i>SIC</i>	www.sic-consult.de
<i>Speed Step</i>	www.speedstep.de
<i>W+P Solutions</i>	www.walter-partner.com

Cost

To estimate the cost of a PDM solution, the whole project must be considered. On top of the pure licence costs for the software there are the costs of services and any additional hardware needed. Standard solutions that can be used immediately often give the best value for money if they cover the customer's requirements. From experience, highly flexible solutions demand more investment for adaptation both in terms of time and money. The higher the number of users is, the less these start-up costs matter. When a cost comparison between several systems is done, the cost of the time of the firm's own employees and the costs after introduction, for example for support, should be allowed for in the calculation.

The author

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Although cost is an important aspect, it is usually not the only criterion in coming to a decision. After all, the solution selected affects the entire company. The functionality must convince the users and the product must fit into the existing technological setup and the company strategy. Therefore every company should determine its requirements as precisely as possible and make an appropriate initial selection of suppliers based on these. A presentation of the program in which the fulfilment of the requirements is assessed is an important element in the decision process. The decision will always include subjective elements, because customer tastes are as different as the programs. The market offers a wide range of solutions for any requirements.

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