NAEM Conference: As Environmental IT Systems Age, Users Seek New Functions
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Environmental, health and safety (EHS) software packages are aging, and common practices emerging as the market matures, a survey out today suggests.

In a survey of National Association for Environmental Management (NAEM) members, as well as attendees at an NAEM conference, over 40 percent of respondents said they have had their management information systems (MIS) in place for two to five years. Another group of respondents, over 30 percent, have had their system for more than five years (see chart).

"Applications are getting older. You can call that mature, or you can call that decrepit," said AECOM's IT project director for environment, Jake White, who presented the results at the NAEM EHS MIS conference in San Antonio.

"What this implies for the near future is a subject we should have a discussion about," White added."Does this mean we're ready for a renewal? Or does it mean that the systems in place are working just fine, thank you very much?"

The survey was answered by 70 respondents, of whom 52 provided meaningful data, NAEM said.

With market maturity has come some agreement on accepted practices. Nearly all respondents are using web-based systems. External hosting among respondents has increased since the last NAEM survey in 2009.

"If you go to your IT department that has an issue [with external hosting], you can say, 'Lots of other people are doing it,'" White said.

A growing number of respondents are paying for software as a service, instead of on a license basis. And most respondents use some do-it-yourself software. Even among the many companies buying off-the-shelf solutions, most still maintain a number of home-grown systems.

Some other trends appear to have lost steam. Last decade there seemed to be a move towards a consolidation of IT systems over a single platform, White said. Now, companies are determining which systems truly need to be integrated. Of the respondents, 23 plan to integrate their EHS system with manufacturing software and 21 with accounting and enterprise resource planning systems.

EHS professionals answering the survey said that incident statistics and notice of violation systems are the types of information management that company executives ask for most. Next came sustainability metrics and greenhouse gas reporting.

In an intriguing finding, respondents said that carbon footprinting is their greatest unmet need when it comes to data systems – but few plan to spend more money on it soon, with the metric ranking 13th among planned spending areas in the next 24 months.

Audience members suggested that this apparent discrepancy may reflect a lack of mature carbon footprinting software, the difficulty of integrating this function with other systems, or that companies perceive carbon reporting as a future rather than a current need.

Process and change management tasks and GHG reporting tasks were ranked the second and third greatest unmet need. Packaging and LEED have fallen down those rankings since 2009.

The manufacturing sector accounted for over half of respondents: 12 percent of respondents work for electronic manufacturers, and 31 percent for other types of manufacturers. Food and beverage makers were also well-represented, with 10 percent.

Over three-quarters of respondents said they are employed by corporations with revenues of at least $1 billion, and of those, 41 percent have revenue over $10 billion.

White noted that in the survey, companies' spend on EHS MIS didn't correlate well with their income. "We're a little cheap," he said.