

Summary of Proceedings from #SWAC 2018 : Delivering Data

South West Ag Conference Proceedings Summary

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A bird's eye view of the data management systems being offered in Ontario, what they deliver and what to consider before you decide.

In a few short years the ag marketplace has changed from a landscape with only a few programs available to manage farm information to a very crowded and sometimes confusing field of apps, software and data services. Ontario farmers are fortunate in that there is an abundance of highly experienced consultants and crop input suppliers who have been involved in precision ag and the data generated since the inception of these technologies. Now growers and industry users are looking at the newest data management offerings.

Available over the developing years more traditional desktop software (AgLeader's SMS, John Deere's Apex, SST Summit, Trimble's Farm Works) has gradually moved more and more to the cloud, leveraging internet connectivity from field-or tractor cab-to office and back as with AgLeader's Agfiniti, Deere's Operation Center, SST SIRRUS and Trimble Connected Farm.

A number of cloud based industry offerings are joining the public consciousness. Including, but not limited to Climate Corp's FieldView, Dupont/Pioneer Encira Services, BASF's Compass, Bayer's upcoming Xarvio. There are also a hundred others out there, many popping up from Silicon Valley startups and others from recognized Ag industry companies. All of the brands listed are developing increasing interconnectedness throughout the industry.

Weather and imagery products are becoming the newest "shiny beads" being offered to the market. How accurate are they? How useful are they?

As you investigate or sample these industry options consider the following guidelines.

1. Understand what you want or need to do that these new products might offer

The presentation will highlight the "what can I do with it?" or "why would I want it?", but first question you need to ask is "what do I want to be able to do?". Having a strong sense of purpose or a healthy dose of curiosity is the best way to determine whether any of these programs is right for you and your business. Best approach is to investigate both online and with your local rep for these companies. They know their product and talking to them will gauge their knowledge of the product and their ability to work with you if you choose their product.

Only you can determine whether you need to be able to "view" or if you need more tools to be able to "do".

2. Understand what the product really is:

Software or "App" that allows you to create your own data or view/manipulate your own data usually loaded on a desktop or laptop. If you stop paying for updates, the software is still there with your data even if not newest version.

Software as a Service (SaaS) Web based or Cloud app, purchased by a subscription. You license the use of the website/app/software for as long as you are a subscriber. You have to take your data out if you intend to discontinue use, as once you do, your contact with data is gone.

Data as a Service (DaaS) Web based or Cloud app as above but usually data is also provided such as background data, imagery or periodic feed of data and imagery. Usually data provided is only accessible while subscription is in place and is not transferable, only useable within the App.

Some companies want to deal direct to grower and then the grower can elect to share over to an advisor or local supplier or consultant. Some systems are designed to be adopted by an advisor, then linking to his grower network. There are pros and cons to each of these designs depending on who you are in that sharing relationship.

3. Understand what you are really paying:

In every internet connected app there is a component of tracking of the exchanged information. Each software or provider has different levels of interest in the exchanged data, sometimes for monitoring the proper delivery of the product, sometimes for marketing, sometimes to extract aggregated information. **No software/app is ever free.** If you did not pay money, then the company is using the freebie as a pre-sale incentive, to collect information that has value to them or you are in effect paying them by giving them your information.

Payment levels are often tied to how many tools you get to use. Lowest cost programs are “view only”, more cost is involved where more tools or more data services are part of the package. This allows you to only buy what you need, and to grow into more levels of service by opting in.

When companies that have a physical product line being supported by a software/data service then there is an obvious link between product use and the company's development of the product. There may be a graduated cost, also linked to your patronage.

Be comfortable with the arrangement by finding out what the user agreement states. Educate yourself. Read, Ask before you click the ‘yes’ button.

4. How will you be supported

Between online training, support documents or local classes and local experts; how well is this product supported? Every new thing has instructions. Do they make sense? Even the easy button has a learning curve to get the most out of it.

5. Technology is going to change; what if you want to move your data to another service?

All companies are striving to ‘be all things’ and to keep your continued business, but reality says you might want to change brands or service providers some day. You might sell or pass on your business and you want to ensure transfer of data. Can you get your data out? How easy is that? What formats can they come out as-what other programs read that format? Will that work with the next product? Can I get my original data out? Can I get the things out that I have made in the program? What are the exit limitations?

Concluding Remarks

I am a firm believer that data, especially map based data must be experienced. Seeing your data as a map in addition to a report or spreadsheet or pie chart will always be of value.

Delving into your own data will either confirm you are on the right management path that you have planned or it will provide the information you need to prosper in an ever changing business

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environment. Most importantly, it should inspire curiosity and wonder as we continually improve, develop and grow as this industry's drivers.

As I always say: "The best software is one you will actually use."

I encourage you to try some of these new data products on for size, but be wary of claims that they are all you will ever need. Often the best products are those that compliment or can work as part of a suite of capability. They are all going to change, add features and uses as time and technology changes. So, don't think that waiting until they are complete is a good way to procrastinate. Technology is never done. Get on board now and start experiencing for yourself!

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