# What is integration?

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#### Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide a clarification of the meaning of the term integration.

Design/methodology/approach - A taxonomy of integration definitions derived from the academic and trade literature is developed, analyzed, and documented.

Findings — Integration is a word that is commonly used when discussing enterprise applications. The term integration is inserted in technical papers, e-mail messages, correspondence, proposals, and even causal conversations. After many years of project work, and many misunderstandings and failed meetings and workshops, it can only be stated that the word has multiple and misunderstood meanings. For technical papers (research and trade), the term must be provided with context, or it is impossible to have a meaningful conversation. Next, multiple alternative definitions (that are valid in the literature for the appropriate context) are presented and explained in some detail.

Research limitations/implications - The paper is not exhaustive, since new definitions of integration may exist or may emerge.

Originality/value – The main contribution of the paper is that it yields clarity on a key term that is frequently used in information systems research. The paper is useful to any researchers or practitioners who are focused on enterprise system implementation.

Keywords Integration, Interface management, Applications, Information systems, Research

Paper type General review

#### Introduction and importance

Integration is a common term in the enterprise systems literature. Seldom does a meeting occur when the word is not used multiple times and often within quite technical contexts. Unfortunately, our experience is that individuals often have a different understanding of the meaning of the word. Loosely speaking, there is a general consensus that integration concerns making applications work together that were never intended to work together by passing information through some form of interface. This is certainly part of the context, but this paper argues that there is more to be said. Since the earliest days of computing, the term "integration" has been used in both the trade and academic literature to describe a process, a condition, a system, and an end-state. Given that these competing labels have very different meanings, their indiscriminate usage is often obscure and invites confusion. For example, a sloppy conflation of process and condition encourages circular definitions that possess little explanatory power.

Consider the following advertisement (Figure 1) from the Oracle Corporation and the corresponding quote from the Oracle CEO, Larry Ellison. Figure 1 is clearly an appeal for a type of integration that we call "Big I," having all relevant data aligned with a single data model and stored only once. The implication is that you can place all of your data for the set of business processes listed in the middle column of Figure 1 inside of the Oracle E-Business Suite and significantly reduce total cost of ownership (TCO). In fact, the advertisement claims that Oracle saved over \$1 billion USD per year by implementing Big I. The other implication in the quote is that if you implement "Best of Breed" with interfaces, you are going to have implementation problems;



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