Voices 4 features to look for in an expense management system

By Dave Terry
Published April 21 2017, 11:57am EDT

More in Expense management, Expense management software, Technology

Corporate road warriors often complain about filing their expense reports, be they on spreadsheets or using their employer's clunky, antiquated solution. The process can be time-consuming, making it easy to put off, which leads to delays in reimbursement. Finance teams also tire of having to manually process and code hundreds or even thousands of expense reports each month.

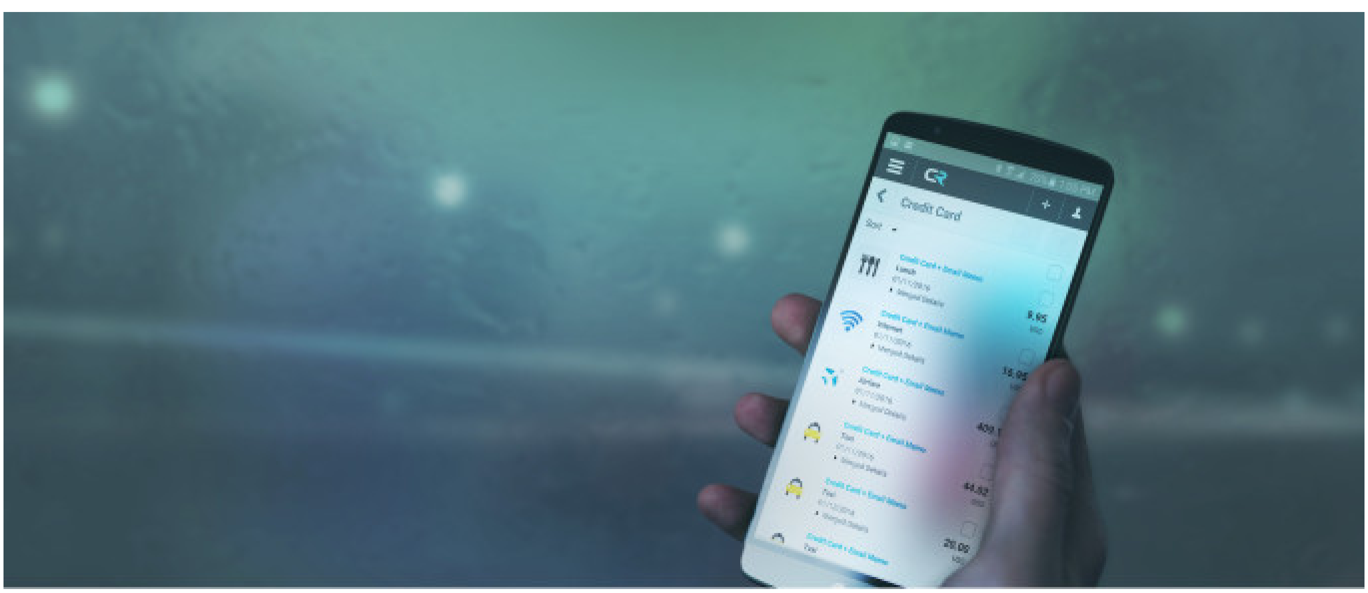
If this sounds like your organization, maybe it's time to start looking for a new solution. Given the variety of vendors offering expense management technology, what should companies look for in their next system? While not every organization has the same requirements, there are some common themes that every company should consider when looking at a new solution:

1. Ease of use: Unlike many specialized solutions such as accounting software, which are only used by a certain team, expense solutions are used across the organization. However, unlike most other enterprise-wide applications (such as Word or Excel), a significant number of employees may only use it once every few months. Therefore, ease of use is a critical factor, or it could lead to huge headaches for your employees and admin team alike.

The key is it being easy for end-users to enter expenses, both in the office and on the road. Probably the easiest way – as it doesn't even require logging on to the expense account – is to simply take a photo of the receipt and email it directly into the system, or just forward email receipts, such as hotel booking confirmations. However, if users still have to enter all the transaction details (merchant, date, amount, etc.) to create an expense, it's still cumbersome to use. So consider looking for a solution with sophisticated data parsing and optical character recognition (OCR) capabilities, so it can "read" receipt images and pull out transaction information such as date, vendor and amount, and drop this directly into your expense report along with the image.

2. True mobility: As well as a significant amount of expenses being incurred on the road, many of the heaviest users of expense management software – the road warriors – spend much of their time out of the office. They need to be able to submit their expenses from anywhere, on any device, in order to be reimbursed quickly and avoid credit card charges and interest.

Therefore, an expense solution needs to work just as well on a mobile phone as a laptop or desktop. The first thought may be to look for a solution with iOS and Android apps. However, this isn't necessarily the best approach. First, some companies still have a significant number of BlackBerry users, who will be left out using the mobile app route. Second, apps rarely look the same as, or offer the same functionality as, the full version. There can also often be differences between different versions, which can lead to a major headache for training and support – especially for organizations with a BYOD (bring your own device) policy. Look instead for a web-app-based solution, which can be accessed through any browser, and offers the same look, feel and functionality regardless of the device it's being used on.



3. Scalability and flexibility: Anyone who has ever replaced an enterprise-wide software solution will tell you that it's not something they want to do again soon. To avoid this, it's critical to find a solution that works not just today, but for your organization's future needs as you grow, enter new markets or perform acquisitions.

Obviously, the need to handle multiple currencies and language is a given, but it goes beyond that. Is the solution set up so it can handle the tax jurisdictions in all of the markets where you will need to use it? What about technical regulations such as Mexican XML? Can support be offered in the languages that your administrators require?

Scalability isn't just a globalization issue, either. As companies evolve, their processes often become more complex, and this also applies to expenses. Unless you're planning on never growing, you need a solution that can be configured and re-configured to fit your company's evolving requirements (without huge consulting fees each time).

4. True partner relationship: When looking for any solution, it's easy just to go to the biggest vendor, safe in the knowledge that it will have the capabilities to handle your needs. However, there is often a fine line between them being big enough for you, and you being big enough for them. You could find yourself in a situation of being simply too small to get their full attention. Instead, look for a solution that can offer capabilities that may outstrip your current requirements (so you can "grow into" them and turn them on as required), but from a company that gives you the level of service that you're looking for from a true partner.

While this certainly isn't an exhaustive list, and every company will have its specific needs, these four elements offer a good starting point for your expense management selection process. Your team will thank you for choosing the right provider.

Dave Terry

Dave Terry is co-founder and chief operating officer at Chrome River Technologies.

More Articles

PCAOB enforcement sweep targets non-U.S. accounting firms for failing to report disciplinary matters

Does service diversification reduce risk for firms?

5 ways to make more money with existing clients

Comments

Login or Register