

# Ten Questions on SAP Data Quality With BackOffice's Tom Kennedy

by Bruce Richardson

**W**ithin two minutes of meeting Tom Kennedy, you realize he has an encyclopedic knowledge of **SAP's** data architecture. Mr. Kennedy started **BackOffice Associates** 12 years ago to focus on improving and managing data quality for SAP customers. Since its inception, BackOffice has worked with over 350 customers to ensure they have a "Boring Go Live."

The issues of data management, data quality, and data governance will be top of mind at SAP's annual SAPHIRE user conference, which begins today. With that in mind, we sat down with Mr. Kennedy, who's also the company's chairman and chief technology officer, to get his perspectives.

**FTM:** Tom, before starting BackOffice, you spent most of your life developing custom applications for large companies. How did you end up in the SAP data quality business?

**Mr. Kennedy:** A friend approached me regarding an SAP project that was struggling at **Lucent Technologies**. Lucent had been working on the project for over a year when I arrived there, and it had spent a lot of money trying different approaches to get its data working in SAP. The data conversion team consisted of 25 ABAP programmers working on loading data. The success rate was low, so Lucent asked for an alternative strategy. I proposed a strategy for building a nontechnical approach to loading data and replaced the 25 ABAP programmers with four business-savvy consultants. That was 12 years ago. What was the secret? Experience matters. You need business people looking at business data to solve the data quality problem.

**FTM:** In one of our first meetings, you talked about customers with 1.2 million items in the item master, 500,000 customers, 100,000 suppliers, 10,000 SAP seats, and more than 14 million daily transactions in their SAP systems. I'm sure they're grappling with tens of terabytes of SAP data to manage too. How did you work with them on their implementations, and what do you do for them post-implementation?

**Mr. Kennedy:** Getting the business to focus on data issues early in the SAP project is a major key to our success. How do we do that? If you give a business person a specific report that contains obvious defects in her data, she'll fix it. For example, here's a list of manufactured items that are missing a bill of materials (BOM). Without a BOM, SAP cannot cost the item, so you will not be able to invoice for it. Fix it before we go live. Specific data quality issues that can be tied to a business process get their attention. A vague comment like "Go clean up your data" is not an actionable event. We get very specific right from the beginning of a project.

**FTM:** SAP estimates that data migration accounts for 20% to 40% of the cost of a new implementation or upgrade. Is it possible to get that down to single digits?

**Mr. Kennedy:** Yes, but it takes experience. BackOffice brings 12 years of data migration experience for the largest clients globally and solves the problem of Business Ready Data with proven methodology, experienced people, and world-class software. This results in being at least 50% more efficient to traditional approaches of ETL tools or just writing load programs.

**FTM:** When we last got together, you mentioned four numbers that stayed with me. You said that a large process manufacturer may have as many as 50,000 tables and one million fields to configure. Of the million, only 1,300 fields really matter. And, of the 1,300, only 80 are really different from one customer to another. It seems like it should be easier to configure SAP than it is.

**Mr. Kennedy:** Clients buy SAP to take advantage of its industry solutions. However, the people assigned to a project are often new to SAP and the SAP vocabulary. We try to bridge the gap by showing clients what their data will look like and how it will behave in SAP. We believe that bringing that knowledge to a project can accelerate an implementation. We see more and more clients asking for us to join in the “blueprinting” phase of a project to allow the data to affect the design of the system.

**FTM:** SAP has been touting its master data management (MDM) capabilities since the launch of NetWeaver. I have talked to SAP about its MDM offering and plans for Business Objects. They don't really offer the same functionality or services. How are you positioning BackOffice relative to SAP's offerings?

**Mr. Kennedy:** SAP MDM and BackOffice's Data Governance products are complementary. The SAP MDM product is primarily focused on the distribution of master data across heterogeneous environments. We at BackOffice have focused on solutions designed to gather master data from multiple users, who are each playing a role in a business process. Most of our clients are trying to get to a single instance of SAP. As a result, our clients are more interested in the gathering of master data than the distribution of that data. However, many of our larger clients that do have multiple instances of SAP and other interfaced systems use us to gather the data and load it into SAP MDM to distribute the data.

**FTM:** One of your core messages is “Load early, load often” instead of waiting until two weeks before the planned go-live date to load data. Your approach results in a Boring Go Live, without the cost overruns and stress. Why don't more system integrators adopt your approach?

**Mr. Kennedy:** Simply put, the systems integrators put the least experienced people on the data migration teams. We place experienced people on data migration projects. As a result, we start every project knowing the data scope and what objects and fields need to be paid attention to. We can load data within the first four to six weeks of a project. In order to do that, you need experience.

**FTM:** Speaking of integrators, I've talked to many of your large customers that are impressed by the effectiveness and efficiency of the typical small teams you require. How do you replicate your SAP knowledge with new BackOffice employees?

**Mr. Kennedy:** First of all, we have a great recruiting and testing processes. We do something unique. We actually train people and evaluate them before we hire them. We recruit business people and see if they can learn our methodology. After the three days of training, we test them. We find that roughly 50% are good enough and fast enough for us to hire. We recruit business knowledge, but we hire based on speed! The next critical step in training is getting across the notion that data is a shared responsibility. Simply giving a client a list of 100,000 error messages is not a deliverable. Bad data and changing requirements are not acceptable excuses for project delays. They are the reason for our existence. So, we train our people to accept this as fact and plan accordingly. This sets a very high expectation with our employees, and we hold them accountable to deliver 100% success for our clients. It works.

**FTM:** Any interest in moving into the tools business? Companies like **IntelliCorp** and **Panaya** are building nice businesses providing tools that help identify the changes between various releases of SAP software.

**Mr. Kennedy:** We will continue to develop tools to better service our clients. For example, we have developed tools and processes to assist in the consolidation of SAP instances. Instance consolidation is a very hot area for us right now. We have recently developed tools for the management of SAP security. But our focus as a company will always be more on solutions rather than providing tools. We believe people make the difference, not the tools.

**FTM:** Given that BackOffice knows the location of every data element in SAP, any chance that we see you offering software for business intelligence or performance management? I know several companies that would love to be acquired.

**Mr. Kennedy:** Let's talk! We know data!

**FTM:** Any plans to support Oracle, Infor, or any other ERP vendors?

**Mr. Kennedy:** We love working with SAP. SAP provides the power and flexibility that our clients demand. We do from time to time assist our clients in non-SAP areas, but it's typically done within the context of an SAP initiative.

**FTM:** Tom, thank you for your time. I hope SAPPHERE is productive for you.