

process involves obtaining hands-on experience with the product. To this end, most vendors of shrink-wrapped software solutions will agree to a 30-day free trial. For more complicated systems that require some degree of customization or special hardware, many vendors will agree to absorb some of the cost of a pilot program in which a limited installation is provided for a three- or four-month trial.

The KM-specific criteria for evaluating solutions are a function of the product. Assuming a software application aimed at enabling communities of practice, potential criteria include:

- *Compatibility.* The product should be compatible with the operating system used, third-party KM programs, and legacy systems.
- *Support.* Product support should include official user's groups, vendor or developer newsletters, and official publications.
- *Synergy.* The product should support for processes within the organization that enable ongoing communities of practice.
- *Performance.* The effectiveness and efficiency with which the product supports activities within communities of practice should be a performance standard.

In the end, the features and benefits of every solution have to be evaluated in terms of price. In this evaluation, it's important to distinguish between the initial purchase price and ongoing, long-term costs. Besides the purchase price, there is the cost of maintenance—typically 30 percent of the original price per year. Ongoing license fees, can range from 10 to 20 percent of the purchase price annually. The cost of upgrades should be evaluated if they aren't covered in the maintenance contract.

Solutions should be evaluated in terms of indirect costs that are usually not included in the contract with the vendor. For example, if the system is intended to support real-time video conferencing over the web, the buying organization may need to upgrade its current network