NetEDI - PEPPOL Compliant Provider

A guide to choosing a PEPPOL Service Provider

If your company supplies goods or services to NHS England hospitals you should receive guidance from the Department of Health regarding how to comply with the NHS eProcurement Strategy and getting yourself connected to a PEPPOL Access point. PEPPOL (Pan European Public Procurement Online) is the electronic format chosen by the NHS for transmitting Purchase Orders and Invoices between hospitals and suppliers. Guidance also includes information pertaining to GS1 barcoding which will be used to achieve unique product identification.

While a business will need both PEPPOL and GS1 in order to be ready for the NHS strategy rollout, in most cases, they must be procured separately.

This post looks at which factors a business should consider when evaluating a prospective PEPPOL Provider.

PEPPOL Provider Evaluation Criteria

1. PEPPOL Credentials

When you're picking a PEPPOL provider, you must ensure that they are skilled in handling PEPPOL documents. New PEPPOL providers may well be long-standing EDI or eBusiness providers, however they may not yet have seen a single live PEPPOL transaction. NetEDI do have the necessary experience in implementing numerous PEPPOL instances and have the real-world know-how that your business needs for a successful eProcurement strategy.

2. ERP Integration, Web Interface, or "within a Tool"

The biggest cost factor in getting a PEPPOL setup will be determined by whether you have a standalone web interface to PEPPOL, whether you have PEPPOL integrated into your ERP, or if you access PEPPOL via some other eBusiness tool.

ERP
Full integration to your ERP will be the most expensive option, but for businesses with high monthly volumes of orders & invoices per month this would be the only viable option. Such a solution provides for touchless receipt and validation of Purchase Orders into your ERP, automated initiation of order fulfillment, generation of Advanced Shipping Notification, and Invoices. This is the solution that will free up your order processing and billing teams to be able to do more. NetEDI specialise in providing ERP integration solutions, we can work with any file format and are able to utilise web-services to ensure transactions are delivered seamlessly into your ERP system.

Web Portal

A PEPPOL web interface solution is useful for low volumes of PEPPOL transactions and the cost can be negligible. The balance that must be struck with such a solution is the lack of integration with your company systems, and associated duplication of effort needed to retype or copy / paste PO and invoice data from one system to another - with increased margin for manual error. It could be argued that such a setup simply replaces a paper, fax or email Purchase Order or Invoice (which also needs manual transfer into your systems) with a more centralised version of the same thing.

Either way, as PEPPOL expands into the NHS and beyond, you need to consider how often you are willing to copy and paste data from one system to another and identify the point up to which you can justify such manual intervention. If an organisation has a self-service web portal with minimal or no upfront cost (and equally minimal support levels) you run the risk of manual error. NetEDI provide simple, practical web based solutions with excellent levels of Support to help you get started and maintain your business to business operation.

"Within an eBusiness Tool"

Many businesses will already use at least one and perhaps many existing eBusiness tools to transact with various trading partners. Some of these existing tools will now add on a PEPPOL connection, allowing users to send + receive PEPPOL documents also.

Often such tools will have been imposed by a larger trading partner in order to simplify their trade, and in the context of what I just described above, an average business may have little added value from such a tool other than it allowing them continuing trade with this partner or providing an additional conduit like phone, fax, email, but still requiring manual transfer to your business systems.

Not all tools are the same, however.

If you can locate an eBusiness tool that adds incremental value to your business by integrating features valuable to your trade as well as access to a trusted PEPPOL provider's backbone, then this may be a very practical way forward.

3. "Virtual" PEPPOL Access Point Providers

Similarly to the mobile phone industry, there are a number of virtual PEPPOL providers using the infrastructure of other PEPPOL providers to deliver service. If you choose a virtual provider as in my partnership example above, you should know if your PEPPOL provider is natively providing the service, or in the case that an issue ever crops up, who is their PEPPOL provider. NetEDI's PEPPOL compliant platform is provided first-hand on their own architecture and developed, supported and maintained in-house. Ultimately the security and reliability of your future NHS trade will be in the hands of the PEPPOL provider who carries your traffic, so it's important to know who that is, and as above, what are their credentials.

4. Infrastructure

PEPPOL "could" be run on a laptop, however, if you don't have a team of PEPPOL experts sitting around it, we wouldn't recommend it. Over the past year, we've spoken to a number of businesses, who tried to implement various DIY PEPPOL solutions with varied levels of success, but who were all coming to me for assistance because the effort of keeping it running was distracting from their core tasks.

You should ensure that your PEPPOL provider is running a highly available infrastructure, with validated security, backup and redundancy protocols. PEPPOL is a remotely delivered computing resource, and should be considered in the same manner as selecting a cloud services provider. NetEDI offer very high levels of service and uptime with an SLE (Service Level Agreement) of almost 99.9% uptime whilst continued investment in the service ensures that the latest technology is always in place.

5. Support

We mentioned above finding out about the total level of PEPPOL technical skill within your chosen service provider. This should NOT include salespeople, but actual technicians who will be called on to set up your solution, and in case of issues, resolve them in a timely manner. Does your service provider have multiple levels of support, a technical helpdesk staffed how many hours per day, how many days per year?

This may be of lower immediate priority to businesses accessing PEPPOL via Web or other tools but are vital to a business needing to get orders in and invoices out in the shortest possible time. NetEDI have a technical team consisting of developers, Quality assurance and support. Each member has attained a strong level technical skill in PEPPOL standards that has been acquired either through hand-on development, practical experience or in-house training.

6. OpenPEPPOL and / or eSens Participation

Beyond your provider's day-to-day PEPPOL transaction handling, you should also ask about their level of active participation in OpenPEPPOL (the group that administers the PEPPOL protocols) and eSens (the EU project to consolidate, improve, and extend technical solutions to foster electronic interaction with public administrations across the EU).

This requires a significant investment in time and materials, and this may indicate a deeper level of commitment to PEPPOL than "just having a client who wants PEPPOL".

As a business you may be making a very significant financial investment in PEPPOL and it makes sense to find a partner who is also fully invested.

7. What ELSE can your potential PEPPOL partner do for you?

While the goal of any business joining up to PEPPOL should be the reduction of overall complexity in their electronic business in favour of PEPPOL, this will not happen overnight. In the interim, businesses will need to continue to navigate multiple standards and coordinate with their service provider and trading partners in order to leverage the maximum benefits from PEPPOL. NetEDI will treat your electronic business as a long term joint project, it is in the company's interest to move partners onto standardised PEPPOL It is in everyone's interest for organisations to move away from historical complexity and towards standardisation.

8. PEPPOL is not only about England / UK and the NHS

Norway and Denmark have already deployed PEPPOL widely, and much of the EU is progressing along the same path. Experience from Norway showed a large Business-to-Business uptake of PEPPOL use, as every company connecting to PEPPOL, in doing so connected to every other company connected to PEPPOL. A business should also be looking to their export / import clientele, and ensuring that whichever provider they choose is able to technically and commercially support future growth in PEPPOL use outside of the UK. As a global organisation, NetEDI work with clients and partners all over world and are well placed to support growth outside of the UK.

9. PEPPOL is about the Buyer + Seller, NOT the Service Provider
Traditional electronic trade gave an unequal share of power to the Service Provider since it was very costly and complex to set up and maintain. Whichever solution, on whichever technology, with whichever support, at whichever price should fit with the future needs of your business. If someone is pushing a proprietary solution towards you, this need not be a bad thing, but you should approach it with eyes open, and knowing that PEPPOL is all about choice, and making the correct choice at the start is key.

Please see below the summary questionnaire you can use to challenge any prospective PEPPOL provider. The standards set in these questions is very high, and most if not all PEPPOL providers, will be challenged to score highly in every area. As a PEPPOL compliant provider, NetEDI take the responsibilty seriously and are well positioned to offer a secure, reliable and scalable platform to suit your needs.

PEPPOL Provider Questionnaire
1) Describe the PEPPOL credentials of your technical team, including years of experience in handling PEPPOL UBL documents.

2) Based upon input already provided about my business, my trading partners and volumes of documents, would you propose an ERP Integration, Web Interface, or "PEPPOL within a Tool" solution, and why?

3) Do you own and operate your own PEPPOL technical infrastructure? If not, who does? How would they answer Question 1, and Question 4?

4) Upon what technical infrastructure does your PEPPOL service run? Which Hardware / Cloud Service? How is redundancy, backup, security handled?

5) Describe your technical support provisions.

6) Describe your involvement with OpenPEPPOL and / or eSens

7) Describe any complementary EDI or eBusiness services you provide that could enhance the PEPPOL experience.

8) Describe the scope of your PEPPOL technical and commercial capabilities OUTSIDE of my home country.

9) What would be your proposal for lowering the complexity of my existing trade, electronic or otherwise, by leveraging PEPPOL?

Join the NetEDI PEPPOL community

Utilising a PEPPOL Solution can pay dividends for your organisation, it would help significantly reduce costs and also allow you to focus on your core business objectives whilst the NetEDI experts look after the day to day management of your system.

For more information on our PEPPOL service contact the Sales team on **01772 977781**, or email **sales@netedi.co.uk** for more information.