SHRINK SOFTWARE

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Choosing Execution-Layer Software.

A vendor-neutral evaluation framework for institutional food manufacturers selecting traceability and workflow execution systems for FSMA 204 compliance and beyond.

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AUDIENCE

Operations leaders, food safety directors, and IT decision-makers evaluating execution-layer software for institutional fresh food production

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Evaluation framework — designed to structure vendor selection conversations and RFP development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why most software evaluations get this wrong.

The institutional food software market is full of vendors who can demonstrate FSMA 204 compliance features in a sales call. Most of them cannot pass an FDA audit at scale. The difference is architectural, not feature-level — and it cannot be discovered by walking through a feature checklist.

This document is for operations leaders who are about to spend $50,000 to $500,000 on execution-layer software and want to make the decision once rather than twice. It is not a vendor pitch. It is a framework for thinking about what actually matters when the system is in production and an inspector or a buyer auditor shows up.

Three claims, in order:

- **The wrong frame produces the wrong choice.** Most RFPs ask vendors to demonstrate compliance features. The right RFPs ask vendors to demonstrate operational integration. These are completely different evaluations.
- **The category matters more than the brand.** Compliance software, ERP modules, and execution-layer platforms are different categories that solve different problems. Picking the wrong category and then optimizing brand selection inside it is the most common expensive mistake.
- **The architecture determines the cost.** The price of software is small compared to the cost of an implementation that fails or has to be redone. The architectural choices made in the first vendor conversation determine which outcome you get.

This document covers (1) the four software categories competing for FSMA 204 budget and what each is actually optimized for, (2) twelve evaluation criteria that separate viable systems from unviable ones, (3) the questions to ask vendor demonstrations that reveal architectural reality, (4) the budget conversation including what is and is not in the price, and (5) how to structure the decision so it is defensible to leadership.

The final section describes how Shrink Software fits in this landscape, for operators who want to evaluate a purpose-built execution layer. Whether you ultimately choose us or someone else is less important than choosing the right category and the right architecture. A bad decision inside a good category is recoverable. A good decision inside the wrong category usually is not.

SECTION 1

The four software categories competing for your budget.

Most operators discover, mid-evaluation, that they have been comparing products that aren't actually competitors. Understanding the categories prevents this. There are four distinct categories of software being sold into the FSMA 204 budget, each optimized for a different problem.

CATEGORY	WHAT IT ACTUALLY SOLVES
Compliance documentation software	Generates compliant-looking reports from data you already have. Optimized for paperwork, not for the operations that produce the underlying records. Examples: SOP libraries, document management systems, electronic compliance binders. Useful for HACCP plan documentation. Insufficient for FSMA 204 because the rule requires records generated at the moment of work, not assembled afterward.
ERP and ERP extensions	Runs financial and inventory transactions for the whole business. Tracks purchases, receipts, transfers, and sales at the transaction level. Examples: NetSuite, SAP, Oracle, Acumatica, Microsoft Dynamics, food-specific ERPs like Aptean. Some have FSMA 204 modules; quality varies widely. Optimized for the office side of food operations, not the floor.
Traceability network platforms	Sit between trading partners and exchange data. Optimized for the supply chain hand-off problem: getting traceability data from your suppliers, sending it to your buyers. Examples: ReposiTrak, iFoodDS, GS1 standards-based exchanges. Solve a real problem but do not capture the operational data itself — they assume you already have it.
Execution-layer platforms	Run the production floor. Capture every workflow event — receiving, transformation, cooling, label print, shipping — at the moment it happens, by the operator doing the work. Generate FSMA 204 records as a byproduct of normal operations. The newest category and the one most operators are unfamiliar with because it didn't really exist five years ago.

The reason this matters: **FSMA 204 compliance requires capabilities from at least three of these four categories.** A single-category solution will leave gaps. The question is which category you build around and which you fill in with adjacent tools.

Which category should be the foundation?

This is the strategic decision that determines everything downstream. The honest answer depends on where the operational gap actually is.

If your gap is documentation — you have the data but it's scattered across spreadsheets, paper logs, and informal records — compliance documentation software will not solve it. The data isn't really there in usable form. You need to fix the data capture, not the documentation.

If your gap is the supply chain hand-off — you have clean internal data but cannot transmit it to your buyers in their required format — a traceability network platform may be the right entry point. This is unusual but real.

If your gap is the data itself — your floor-level operational work is not currently captured in any structured form — you have an execution layer problem, and only an execution-layer platform will fix it. This is the gap most institutional food manufacturers actually have, even when they believe their problem is something else.

> **The most common diagnostic error.**
>
> Operators frequently believe they have a documentation problem when they actually have an execution-layer problem. The tell is this question: "If I asked your shift lead to produce a list, right now, of every input lot used in production yesterday morning, how long would it take and how accurate would it be?" If the answer is more than an hour, or includes any phrase like "we'd have to check the paper logs," the gap is at the execution layer, not at the documentation layer. Buying compliance documentation software at this point makes the existing problem look prettier without solving it.

SECTION 2

Twelve evaluation criteria.

These criteria separate execution-layer systems that will actually work from those that demonstrate well in sales calls and fail in production. They are organized into three groups: operational integration, compliance reliability, and platform durability.

Operational integration (criteria 1–4)

1. Workflow-gated execution at the point of work

The system creates records when work happens, by the operator doing the work, on the device they are using. Not entered retroactively at end of shift. Not aggregated from paper logs by an administrative assistant. **This is the single criterion that distinguishes execution-layer platforms from everything else.** If a system requires data to be entered after the fact, in a separate workflow, or by a different person than the one who did the work, it is not workflow-gated.

2. Real-time lot linkage across transformation

When ingredients are used in a production run, the system links input lots to output lots automatically, without operator math. The receiving record for ingredient X becomes the input record for production order Y becomes the shipping record for delivery Z, with the chain assembled by the system rather than the operator. Manual lot code re-entry at each step is the failure mode this criterion is designed to prevent.

3. Mobile-first and multilingual

Institutional food operations have diverse workforces. A meaningful fraction of your floor staff is more comfortable in Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese, or another language than in English. A system that requires English-language interaction will see data quality collapse at exactly the workflows where compliance depends on accuracy. Demand multilingual support as a baseline requirement, not a future feature.

4. ERP coexistence, not replacement

Your financial system should not have to change for FSMA 204 compliance. If a vendor requires you to replatform your ERP, that is a structural problem with their solution, not a virtue. The integration scope between an execution-layer platform and your existing ERP should be bounded: order-to-invoice flow, supplier data sync, and inventory reconciliation. Anything more invasive should be a red flag.

Compliance reliability (criteria 5–8)

5. One-click traceability retrieval

Pick any finished product produced in the last twelve months. Trace it backward to all input lots received. Trace it forward to all customer delivery records. The result should appear in under 30 seconds, not be assembled by an analyst. Demonstrate this live during the vendor evaluation, with a lot code chosen by the operator, not by the vendor. Most systems fail this test silently — vendors structure demos around pre-prepared lots that perform well.

6. Audit-ready output formats

The system produces FDA-format traceability records directly, exportable to the agency's specified electronic spreadsheet format. It does not produce records that require manual reformatting before submission. FDA inspectors expect records in a specific format; if your system produces records in a different format and someone has to translate, that's a Trap 1 documentation-project failure in waiting.

7. Audit-defensible record integrity

Records, once created, cannot be silently modified. Edits leave audit trails. Operators have logged identities. Timestamps are system-generated, not operator-entered. Any system where the record of work can be edited without trace will fail an FDA investigation when the inspector asks how they know the record is authentic. This is foundational to the rule.

8. Buyer-facing data exchange

The system can transmit Key Data Elements to your buyers' supplier portals in the formats they require. This is where execution-layer platforms and traceability network platforms intersect. Some execution-layer platforms include native integrations with ReposiTrak, iFoodDS, Walmart Supplier One, and other buyer-facing networks. Others require a separate integration layer. Confirm before signing.

Platform durability (criteria 9–12)

9. Multi-tenant cloud architecture

The platform is cloud-native and multi-tenant — meaning your data lives in a system that is continuously updated, monitored, and improved without per-customer maintenance work. Single-tenant on-premise systems require dedicated IT resources, manual updates, and security patching that institutional food operators are not staffed for. This consideration is often invisible during evaluation and becomes the dominant cost driver three years in.

10. Cost transparency and predictability

Pricing structure is clear: per-site, per-user, per-event, or some combination, with no surprise charges for integrations, updates, or audit support. Vendors who cannot explain pricing in two sentences usually have pricing models designed to extract additional revenue after the initial sale. Per-site pricing tends to be most predictable for multi-site operators.

11. Operator-built product origin

The vendor has direct operational experience running the kind of facility the software serves. Most FSMA 204 software is being built by software companies who studied the regulation; some is being built by operators who lived the problem. The difference shows up in workflow details that only matter to people

who have actually worked a production floor. Ask any prospective vendor for a specific example of a problem their product solves that they only learned about by running a kitchen. Vendors who cannot answer this question have not been in the work.

12. Vertical extensibility roadmap

The platform is being built for the long horizon, not the next regulatory event. FSMA 204 is the current driver; the same operational pattern serves pharmaceutical manufacturing, medical device production, cannabis processing, and other regulated production operations. A platform that is architecturally extensible across these verticals will compound in value as your operation grows. A platform built only for food compliance will be technically obsolete the moment the next regulatory wave hits.

SECTION 3

What to ask in vendor demonstrations.

Vendor demonstrations are optimized to show capabilities. They are not optimized to reveal architectural reality. The questions below are designed to surface the difference. Each one has a specific failure mode it is designed to expose.

"Show me a lot code traced from receiving to shipping. Use a lot I pick."

Reveals whether the system genuinely supports one-click traceability or whether the demo lot was pre-staged for performance. Operators who pick their own lot routinely discover demonstrations that perform in 30 seconds with the vendor's lot take three minutes with theirs.

"Show me what an operator sees on the floor during receiving, in Spanish."

Reveals whether multilingual support is real or aspirational. Many systems advertise multilingual support that turns out to be partial — the navigation is translated but the actual workflow forms are English-only. Demand to see the actual workflow in the actual language.

"What happens if a lot code is entered incorrectly and not caught for three days?"

Reveals record-integrity architecture. The right answer involves audit trails, propagation through downstream records, correction workflows that preserve the original entry. The wrong answer is "we just edit the field." Edit-without-trace is a structural compliance failure regardless of what the vendor says about it.

"Show me your last three FDA audit outcomes from reference customers."

Reveals whether the system has actually been audited at scale. Many vendors have customers but few have customers who have been through an FDA traceability audit. If the vendor cannot produce reference

customers with audit history, the system is theoretical with respect to the rule even if it is real with respect to the software.

"Walk me through your data architecture for transformation events."

Reveals whether the system models input-to-output lot linkages as first-class objects or as report queries. The right answer involves a database schema where the relationship is structurally enforced. The wrong answer is "we run a SQL query to assemble that when needed." Query-time assembly is brittle, slow at scale, and prone to inconsistency when input data changes.

"Tell me about a customer implementation that went badly."

Reveals whether the vendor will be honest about failure modes. Every vendor has had bad implementations; vendors who cannot describe one have either been lying or have been too small for failure modes to surface. The vendor who says "here's what went wrong, here's what we learned, here's what we do differently now" is the vendor who has been in the work.

"What's the implementation timeline for our specific number of sites?"

Reveals whether the vendor has implementation discipline. The honest answer involves 90-day pilots, multi-quarter rollouts, and acknowledgment of training time. The dishonest answer is "we can have you live in 30 days." Software might be deployable in 30 days. Operational integration cannot be.

"Who owns data quality after go-live?"

Reveals whether the vendor will help when the predictable post-launch data quality problems arise, or whether you are on your own. The right answer involves an account management commitment, periodic data audits, and a specified support relationship. The wrong answer is silence followed by "we can sell you a professional services engagement to address that."

SECTION 4

The honest budget conversation.

Software vendors quote software prices. The total cost of an FSMA 204 implementation is larger than the software price by a factor of two to four, and almost none of that additional cost shows up in vendor proposals. Operators who budget only for the software cost run out of money mid-implementation and produce a worse outcome than operators who budget realistically from the start.

COST CATEGORY	WHAT IT COVERS
Software licensing	The published per-site, per-user, or per-event cost. Usually $300 to $2,000 per site per month for execution-layer platforms in this category, depending on functionality and scale. Multi-year commitments typically reduce this 15–25%.
Implementation services	One-time cost for system configuration, data migration, workflow design, and initial training. Typically equal to 6–12 months of software license cost. Vendors who claim "no implementation services required" are either selling something too simple to solve the problem or hiding the cost in mandatory professional services packages.
Internal labor	The cost of your operations, food safety, and IT teams' time during implementation. Roughly 0.5 to 1.0 FTE-equivalent across the 18-month implementation period. This is the largest hidden cost in most implementations and the one most operators forget to budget for.
Hardware and devices	Tablets, scanners, label printers, and any rugged-environment hardware for production floor use. Typically $500 to $2,000 per site for a minimally equipped production floor. Some execution-layer platforms support bring-your-own-device approaches that reduce this materially.
Integration with existing systems	One-time cost for connecting the execution layer to your existing ERP, accounting system, and any buyer-facing data exchange networks. Typically $10,000 to $50,000 depending on integration scope and the maturity of the integration tooling.
Training and change management	The cost of training your workforce and managing the operational change. Almost always under-budgeted. Plan for 4–8 hours per operator role, repeated 30 days after initial training, plus management time for change management. Skipping this produces the productivity dip that operators routinely attribute to "bad software."

REALISTIC TOTAL COST

$200,000 to $800,000 for a 10-site institutional food manufacturer over three years.

The software is typically 25–40% of this total. The rest is implementation services, internal labor, hardware, integration, and training. Operators who budget only the software portion run out of money in months 9–15 and produce implementations that fail to deliver the value the software is capable of providing. Operators who budget the full cost get the outcome the software is designed to produce.

SECTION 5

Making the decision defensible to leadership.

An execution-layer software decision is a multi-year operational commitment with budget implications. The decision needs to be defensible to leadership both before purchase (to get the budget approved) and after purchase (when something doesn't go to plan and someone asks why this vendor was selected). The structure below produces decisions that survive both moments.

Document the operational problem before evaluating vendors

The most common failure mode in software selection is letting vendor demonstrations define the problem. The operations team sees three demos, gets impressed by features, and rationalizes a problem statement that fits the features rather than the actual operational gap. A documented current-state map, completed before any vendor conversations begin, prevents this. The map describes today's data capture practices, identifies specific gaps against FSMA 204 requirements, and quantifies the operational impact of those gaps. Vendor demonstrations then get measured against the documented problem.

Build the evaluation criteria before vendor calls

The twelve evaluation criteria in Section 2 of this document are a starting point, not a finished evaluation rubric. Customize them to your operation. Weight them based on which criteria matter most for your specific gaps. Then score each vendor against the weighted rubric. This produces a defensible quantitative comparison that survives the "why didn't we pick Vendor X" conversation six months later.

Insist on a pilot before full commitment

No vendor selection should result in immediate multi-site deployment. The right structure is: select a vendor, run a 90-day pilot at one site, evaluate the pilot against pre-agreed success criteria, and only then

commit to the full rollout. Pilots routinely reveal problems that were invisible in the sales process. Vendors who resist pilots are signaling either pricing model issues or confidence problems with their own product.

Get buyer audit-ready before the FDA deadline

The criterion that distinguishes successful implementations from failed ones is whether the system can survive a buyer audit by Sysco, Walmart, Kroger, Compass Group, or others — months or years before the FDA deadline. Design your implementation timeline against the earlier of these two pressure points, not against the FDA deadline. Operators who optimize their selection for buyer-audit-readiness end up FDA-ready as a side effect. Operators who optimize only for the FDA deadline routinely miss the buyer audit window.

SECTION 6

How Shrink Software fits the framework.

Shrink Manager is an execution-layer platform built for institutional fresh food production. The platform was developed inside an operating institutional food manufacturer (Anu Sushi LLC) over more than two years before being released as a standalone product. It is currently in production across 10 sites processing over one million units per year, with compliance output flowing to 200+ institutional buyer accounts through partner distribution channels including Aramark, Sodexo, and Compass Group.

Mapping against the twelve evaluation criteria in this document:

- **Workflow-gated execution.** Every operator action — receiving, transformation, cooling, label print, shipping — is captured at the moment of work by the operator doing the work. No retroactive entry.
- **Real-time lot linkage.** Input lots are linked to output lots automatically at the moment of production. Patent-protected workflow logic.
- **Mobile-first and multilingual.** Works on any device, in any language the operator prefers. English, Spanish, and additional languages by configuration.
- **ERP coexistence.** Sits alongside NetSuite, SAP, Oracle, Acumatica, or any other ERP. No replatform required. Integration scope is bounded and well-defined.

- **One-click traceability retrieval.** Any lot, backward and forward, in under 30 seconds. We demonstrate this with lots chosen by the operator.
- **FDA-format records.** Records produced directly in FDA-specified electronic spreadsheet format. No manual reformatting.
- **Record integrity.** All records audit-trailed. Operator identities logged. System-generated timestamps. Edits preserve original entries.
- **Buyer-facing exchange.** Direct integrations with major buyer portals and traceability networks.
- **Multi-tenant cloud.** Built on Microsoft Azure. Single-tenant deployment available for operators with specific data residency requirements.
- **Predictable pricing.** Per-site monthly licensing with clear scaling tiers. No per-event surcharges. No surprise integration fees.
- **Operator-built origin.** Built by the operators of Anu Sushi LLC after a NetSuite implementation revealed that ERPs cannot capture floor-level workflow execution. Every workflow detail in the product exists because the founding team ran into the operational reality first.
- **Vertical extensibility.** Architectural patterns extend to pharmaceutical manufacturing, medical device production, regulated packaging, and other production verticals where workflow-gated traceability serves the same operational function. Patent portfolio filed accordingly.

If the framework in this document describes how your team thinks about the decision, the easiest first step is a 30-minute conversation in which we walk through your current state and identify where Shrink Manager would fit. If the framework matches a different vendor's offering better than ours, that is also useful information.

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