

What to look for when purchasing



Nick Cuthbertson, who recently conducted an electronic care planning seminar for ACS members in SA offers some guidelines.

Information Technology is simply a business tool, albeit a very powerful tool that, correctly chosen and well implemented, can transform an organisation, offering reduced cost, improved quality and faster, more efficient operation of your organisation.

The purchase of IT is no different from any other business purchase, and the same rules of diligence apply. However, it can seem complex and bewildering, and there are a number of key factors that can help ensure a successful choice of IT systems for your organisation.

The first step in any software selection is to clearly establish what you are looking for, which can be done via a simple business process review. This involves listing key business processes and will include:

- the current software systems you have;

- the current workflow (list in workflow sequence the processes, documents and reports you utilise);
- infrastructure review – current hardware and network structure;
- personnel review – current level of staff IT literacy;
- needs analysis – the attributes required from a new system.

This simple, high-level review provides a base from which to proceed. With this in place, you can begin to look at the factors that will assist in selecting the right software system for your needs.

1. Suitability and features of the software

Does the software provide the features and workflow that best suits your business? The needs analysis, outlining the changes you want in your current systems and other key parameters that are important to you, provides a useful

model in comparing the offerings of vendors and in determining where else a new system may assist.

You can then compare the workflow of your business against that of a new system. This is very useful in understanding the true impact of a new system on your business and how it will interact with your other systems.

2. Configuration v customisation

Can the software provide the features you want without extensive customisation? Think carefully before selecting a product requiring extensive customisation. Because it will differ from the vendor's mainstream product, it may be difficult and expensive to maintain. A system that can be configured within the current design is preferred.

IT systems

3. Hardware and network requirements

Obtain a clear idea of the infrastructure needs of a new system. Simple is best and for multi-site organisations, network speed is a key consideration. The key impact here is twofold; the cost of any hardware required, and how the new system can be deployed to improve cost and efficiency.

Most recently designed systems are opting for a true web-based structure, which, correctly done, will provide simple, fast, inexpensive connections.

4. Interoperability of the software

Can it simply and easily connect to your other systems? A major concern in the past has been the lack of integration between different software systems. This is no longer an issue; however it is often used as an argument by vendors seeking to sell a total solution such as accounting, care management or payroll. Vendors use the lack of integration as a way to lock clients in to their total software set.

All well-designed software should easily and simply connect with other systems, allowing single point of data entry and allowing you to select the best software for your particular needs. Industry design standards (HL7) have been established so that all software packages will readily exchange data.

The health industry is a leader in this area with the ultimate aim of a single patient record across community, hospital, GP, and aged care. The benefits of interoperability are clear at the micro level, in that it ensures that data is only entered once and then shared across systems which operate as if they were one. However, there are further benefits at a macro level; it allows sharing of data outside your

organisation such as with government, other providers and suppliers, plus it provides you with independence from any one vendor.

5. Is it future proof - will it meet your needs now and in the future?

Aged and community care has undergone rapid change over the past few years, and the pace of change is expected to continue. An important consideration then, is whether this software can grow with your business and be relevant and up-to-date throughout its life.

This is particularly relevant in aged and community care, where many providers are embracing software systems for the first time (eg. care management systems) and seeking to take a first small step. This has led some providers to purchase very basic systems with limited ability to grow. For example, some systems have been designed around the Federal Government's RCS system and will have difficulty maintaining relevance as we move to a new model (ACFI).

The key point is to understand the future capability of the system you purchase. Choose one that is built on a solid base and has a high level of configurability, that will allow you to start simply and then add more features and power as your organisation develops its IT skills.

6. Implementation skills of the vendor

Many good software projects fail as a result of poor implementation. Implementation covers many aspects. Perhaps the three most critical aspects are project management, training and change management. The training

and change management areas are particularly relevant in an industry where IT skill amongst care workers is considered to be relatively low.

7. Vendor support and maintenance

You will have this product at the heart of your business for five years or more, on average, so you must be sure of good, reliable support including:

- a strong help desk;
- regular software updates; and
- a strong development program to enhance the functionality of the software.

The challenges facing aged and community care are many. IT has traditionally played a relatively small role in the sector however, we are now in the midst of a rapid uptake, driven by government incentive and requirements and simply the need to find better tools to manage the explosive growth. By following some key principles and processes, you will be able to drive IT to become a powerful tool for you.

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ACSA has identified Assistive and Information Technology as a priority area for the future of the aged and community care industry. ACSA has agreed to work through the Aged Care Industry Council to advance and guide future work in this area.