

A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO CHOOSING AN INFORMATION SYSTEM

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The decision to computerize your facility is an important one with positive, lasting benefits for your operation. Finding the best solution to your unique information system needs is simplified by following these guidelines.

The Plan

First, establish a plan to research information systems. The plan should contain a detailed outline to guide your study and provide a checklist of necessary features. Be sure to divide the outline into software and hardware sections.

Separate the software section into areas where automation will be beneficial such as accounting, resident care, and operations. Each of these are further divided into applications. Accounting applications include accounts receivable and payable, payroll, general ledger and resident funds. Resident care consists of physician orders, care plans, and assessment. Operations can include dietary management, scheduling, inventory, fixed assets and administration/secretarial.

The hardware section can be divided into system units and peripheral devices. System units consist of processors, disk drives, workstations/terminals, monitors and keyboards. Peripheral devices include printers, modems, bar code readers, electronic time clocks, uninterrupted power supplies, tape drives and fax boards.

Your plan need not be a formal request for proposal; more importantly, it should help you efficiently evaluate the offerings of information system vendors.

Needs Analysis

Next, complete your outline by writing down the goals you want the system to accomplish. Basic features may be present in most software systems, but others may be missing that will significantly impact your organization. Hardware requirements also become evident in the needs analysis. Equipment varies depending on the tasks. Make sure you list the features that meet your requirements.

Meet with your staff and encourage them to write down their ideas. Securing the cooperation of your office staff and department heads through partnership in the needs analysis will ensure the success of the automation project.

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Software

Software should be designed specifically for the long term care industry and should be "integrated" so that information entered once is accessible by related applications. It must be flexible and regularly enhanced to keep up with changes in government regulations like OBRA, the Catastrophic Health Care Act, resident assessment requirements, and ever-changing tax laws.

Examine the system documentation. The documentation's quality is a reflection of the system's quality. Well designed systems are nearly "self-documenting" through extensive use of on-line help. Review report sample to see if they meet your needs.

Multiple facility organizations should look for remote communication, consolidated and comparative financial information, and centralization capabilities. Remote data transferred to a central site is very efficient.

Whether a single facility or a multiple facility chain, include installation, training, and support in your plan. They are as important as software. While basic training is essential to adequately operate the system, advanced training, continuing education, and special interest seminars should be available to realize the full system potential. Toll-free support hotlines provide rapid response to problems without regard to cause.

Software is the most important component of your long term care information system. If the software does not meet your needs, it does not matter how powerful the hardware is.

Hardware

The hardware system should be able to grow with your organization. It should be compatible with most popular software to minimize employee training costs. It can be "state-of-the-art," but it need not be "star wars." Waiting for tomorrow's "perfect" system, means lost advantages today.

Multiuser networks are affordable even for small facilities, yet they can attain high performance levels for large operations. Today's networks are very reliable and easy to operate.

Networks that use "intelligent" workstations do their own actual processing, but they can share common network data and printers. If the network file server is "down," workstations may often continue uninterrupted if they have their own disk drive and files. If needed, a workstation can be reconfigured to take the file server's place minimizing downtime.

In contrast, less expensive terminal-based systems "share" the memory of the central processor, which does all the actual processing. When the central processor of a terminal based system goes down, all the terminals are immediately affected. Terminals cannot replace the central processor.

Hardware maintenance contracts should be part of your plan. They are essential to reduce downtime. Many technicians will repair your system on-site within 24 hours.

Your hardware can be powerful, yet affordable. Most important, hardware needs to be matched with today's tasks and expandable for tomorrow's needs.

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Information System Vendors

Follow your plan as you evaluate information system vendors. No vendor can satisfy every need, but some may meet most requirements and can recommend solutions for others. A single information system vendor solution lets you know who to call no matter what the problem. Systems provided by a single source tend to be integrated software that operates on a proven hardware platform.

Ask the vendor for references. You may know some of their clients. Visit a client site to meet with system operators. Arrange a demonstration in your office or at the information system vendor's offices. Seeing the vendor's office helps you gauge their expertise as you view their development, customer support, and quality assurance operation in action. It also lets you meet the people who will help automate your organization.

Vendors with years of experience providing solutions for organizations similar to yours will help analyze your information system requirements. Established vendors will help make sure the system meets your needs now and in the future

Results

The commitment to automate is only the first step in computerizing your long term care facility. The second step is careful consideration of the available information system solutions using a plan based on a detailed analysis of your needs. Step three is a well coordinated installation and training period with your staff's enthusiastic involvement. The result is an information system that quickly pays for itself through increased efficiency and revenues, quality of care, and completeness of resident care documentation.