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Guidelines for Choosing Records Management Software

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Introduction

Records management software is any computer program designed to systematically control records within an organization. Such software can help manage records in any format, and many programs have advanced capabilities for managing electronic records. However, evaluating, selecting, and purchasing records management software depends on several factors. No one system is right for all users, and the system you choose should fit the size and complexity of your organization. Knowing what you need, how the system will be used, and how much it will cost to acquire and maintain, are the factors you must consider when purchasing software.

Manual systems (such as card files and typewritten lists) may have been effective in the past, but they rarely meet the requirements of today's fast-paced technological environment. Manual systems are inflexible and prone to error, and they are usually time-consuming and costly. An automated system can provide faster access to data by means of its robust searching capabilities, and is usually easy to learn and update. An automated system will also help you organize your myriad records, allowing you to capture, manipulate, and manage the data that the records contain.

This publication will help you choose the appropriate records management software for your organization. If you choose well, records management software can provide many benefits to your organization, including increased productivity, decreased paperwork, greater efficiency, better space management, and improved customer service and support. This publication will also help you determine what you require (and don't

require) of records management software; what you are willing to pay for and what you get for the price; and how to make an intelligent purchase that will achieve the benefits you envision. **Please note, however, that the State Archives cannot review, evaluate, endorse, or recommend particular software products.**

Conducting a Records Inventory

As a user, you must first determine what items or activities the records management software will manage: active records, inactive records, vital records, historical records, records retention scheduling, etc. Identifying your records management needs will help you determine exactly what the software must do. Many organizations identify their records management needs by first conducting a records inventory. Such an inventory will determine what and how many records you have, their physical and environmental condition, how often you refer to them, and where they are currently located. An inventory will also provide a survey of your existing records situation, determine storage needs, identify vital and archival records, improve recordkeeping habits, and provide a foundation for a solid records management plan. Once you have gathered this important information via an inventory, you can begin to investigate what kind of software will work best for your organization.

Determining Your Records Management Software Needs

Before evaluating and selecting records management software to meet your organization's specific needs, you must determine what records management functions the software must support, what general functions the software must possess, and what performance criteria the software must meet.

Records Management Functions

Records management software can provide many specific records management features that you may wish to consider:

- **Destruction notification**
Monitors and controls destruction of records
- **Destruction of electronic records**
Destroys electronic records, making them irrecoverable
- **Request processing**
Captures and manages requests for records or records series
- **File and box tracking**
Tracks the locations and contents of folders and boxes of records, sometimes by the use of bar coding

- **Files management**
Files, stores, retrieves, and updates electronic records, or maintains information on files of paper records
- **Document management**
Regulates the creation, use, and maintenance of electronic records

General Functions

Besides specific records management functions, there are many general functions that you should look for in records management software:

- **Help features**
These can include user-friendly online tutorials, easy-to-understand error messages, and support and training by the vendor
- **Menus and commands**
These should be easy to understand and should be organized in a logical way
- **Speed and accuracy**
You should be able to enter and retrieve data quickly, with reduced retrieval times
- **Generation of standard reports**
The software should generate reports easily and print them out as they are seen on the screen
- **Ease of use**
The software itself should be user-friendly; you should be able to use it the day it is installed
- **Customization**
You should be able to customize the software to meet the specific needs of your organization without sacrificing the benefits of standard practices
- **Ability to manage records throughout their life cycle**
Many organizations purchase software that manages records throughout their life cycle—from creation and active use to inactive use and disposition. Be sure to purchase software that meets your records life cycle requirements.
- **Ability to manage records in all formats**
The software should help you manage records in any format, if necessary, including paper, electronic, micrographic, and audio-visual records
- **Free-text searching across fields**
Any text maintained by the software should allow free-text or keyword searching across fields

- **Security classification and access privileges**
You should have the ability to assign a security or access classification to either an individual record or a series of records. The security classification should operate horizontally, according to membership in units or work groups, as well as vertically, according to rank.
- **Ability to track records' movement**
If necessary, the software should track the movement of records between users

Performance Criteria

In addition to supporting essential records management activities, the records management software you choose should meet these minimum criteria:

- **Must perform on your current computer system.**
Since not all software works on all computers, you do not want to invest in software that may require additional costly hardware to be compatible
- **Must save in comma-separated American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII), the most widely used computer coding method.**
This is necessary to be able to export data to a new system in the future
- **Must come with vendor-supplied support, maintenance, and training**
The software package should provide enough vendor support to ensure that you will be able to use the software effectively

Test the Software

It is in your best interest to preview and test available records management software packages. Contact vendors and ask them to provide you with information on what is included in their packages, such as the level of support (installation, training, and/or maintenance) and the cost of that support. Vendors may also be available to conduct on-site demonstrations or showcase their products at trade shows, conferences, or meetings. Remember, however, that vendors are trying to sell their products, and they will not necessarily point out the weaknesses of their software. Do not limit your contacts to references provided by the vendors. No vendor would supply a reference from someone dissatisfied with the product.

You should test the software on-site if demos or copies of the software are available from the vendor. If you have access to the software at another organization's workplace, test it there. After you test and compare software packages, you can determine which one best serves your needs. You can also seek out information on records management software on the New York State Archives' website at www.archives.nysed.gov, or explore reviews or vendor literature on the Internet.

Questions to Consider When Choosing Records Management Software

During your search for records management software, it will benefit you to ask the following questions about what the software can and cannot do:

What records do I need to manage?

You should know exactly what records you are trying to manage and what problems you are trying to solve. Check with others in your organization about their records needs to help determine the best software solution.

What type of software will meet my needs?

There are many kinds of software that support records management. Be sure you are looking at the right type of product for your specific needs.

What software do other organizations use?

Contact other organizations to see what software they use and why, so you can determine what to avoid and what may work for you.

Is the manual clear and easy to understand?

Vendors should be able to provide you with a copy of the software's manual prior to purchase. The manual should outline how to use the software, and should include information on troubleshooting and contacts for any questions. Examine the table of contents and index for clarity, detail, and comprehensiveness. Make sure you can understand the manual and can use it without difficulty.

Is the software easy or difficult to master?

The software may be too complicated for your needs. A vendor may tell you that the software can do anything you want—but it may also do more than you need. Additional features that you will never use or need will probably cost more. Test the software prior to purchase; if it offers more options than your organization needs, consider other software packages.

Does the system do what it is supposed to do?

You know what you need to manage your records; make sure the software supports those needs. Maintain a list of what you want the software to do, and review the list as you test the package.

Are the screens helpful?

During use, screens provide access to operating procedures. These procedures should be easily brought up on a screen, and should be easy to follow and understand.

Are tutorials available?

Tutorials provide step-by-step instructions on how to operate a system. Tutorials are a bonus in any software package, but they must be presented logically, be written in simple language, and be able to answer your questions clearly and succinctly. Tutorials

can also be good training aids after the system is up and running and no outside help is available.

Will error messages appear when an error is made?

Error messages should appear on the screen when you hit the wrong key or attempt to enter unacceptable data into the system. The message should be clear and easily understood, and provide a recommended solution to the problem. Overriding an error should be permitted only in specific circumstances, as determined by your needs.

Is the system menu-driven?

A menu-driven system executes actions from a list or menu of options. The menus should lead a user smoothly through the system, requiring little interpretation or referral to the manual or to help screens. Menu screens should be easy to understand and organized logically. Shortcuts for experienced users, as well as secure but easy sign-on, should also be provided.

How fast is the system?

Make sure the software works quickly and that your computer can run it without shutting down periodically.

Does the software eliminate the need for redundant data entry?

You should not have to re-enter the same data into the system. You should only need to enter a particular data element once, in one location; it should then carry throughout the system.

Can global changes be performed?

You should have the capability to modify information in the entire system with a single change. With this feature, you can, for instance, change a department's name and update every occurrence of it throughout the system.

Is toggling between files allowed?

The system should allow you to shift back and forth between files or sections of files without having to save the current page, exit to a menu, and transfer to another section or file.

Are backup procedures provided?

The system should provide you with procedures to back up all of your data on a regular basis, and the ability to restore backed-up data if necessary. Determine whether the whole system will need to be backed up or just the data, and determine who will set the schedule to perform regular backups.

What kinds of reports can be generated?

The system should generate standard reports with little user intervention. For example, an inventory software program should generate standard reports of records series by location, department, or destruction date. Reports should be easy for users to format and print. Reports should also be exportable into delimited ASCII (for import into a

separate database) or as straight ASCII text (for inclusion in word processing documents).

Are there other conditions to examine before purchase?

There may be conditions that exist within your organization that should be reviewed prior to purchase of any software. Budgetary flexibility or constraints will determine both the amount you spend on software, hardware, and staffing, and the cost of entering your data into the system. Consult your staff to determine their familiarity with computer use. Review what in-house support you may need. Engage the assistance of others in your organization early on and use their expertise as you plan your records management program.

Are there any special features I require?

There may be special features you may require in any software package you choose. These features may be included in the system, or may be enhancements to the basic application. Some special features include bar coding, label printing, networking capability, and advanced security.

Is there an annual maintenance fee attached to the software?

Some companies that produce specialized records management software charge an annual fee that covers any needed maintenance or upgrades. Since this will be a continuing fee, you should be certain that your organization is willing and able to pay it annually.

Types of Records Management Software

After defining your requirements for records management software, choosing the product becomes an easier process. There are many types of software products available that will address particular needs.

Indexing and searching products

This software allows the user to locate records by searching an indexed database by keyword or through Boolean searching.

Document management software

Designed to manage all of your documents and their creation, storage, and retrieval, electronic document management software can add, edit, search, retrieve, and update records in a variety of electronic formats. Functionality varies by product, and different software packages may include document capture, workflow management, and groupware support.

Records management applications (RMA)

A document management system, an RMA, includes sophisticated records management tools such as retention controls and destruction of obsolete records.

Inventory maintenance products

This software accounts for, maintains, and tracks all the records in an organization. It can provide an online inventory based on department code, record title, contents, and/or box number.

Inactive records maintenance products

This software manages your inactive records through space allocation, file and box tracking, request processing, destruction notification, and chargebacks.

Records Management Software Choices

Commercial Off-the-Shelf Records Management Software

If there are existing **records management** software products that meet most of your needs, it is usually more cost effective to purchase a commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) software package rather than develop one in-house or hire a consultant to write one for you. You may have to modify the way you work in order to accommodate the COTS software, but it offers some advantages over custom-developed applications, including:

- **Immediate availability**
You can purchase the software, install it, and put it to use quickly and efficiently
- **Proven reliability**
The software has usually been tested by many users, so many of its problems have already been resolved
- **Generally lower cost**
The cost will usually be lower than the cost of writing a customized application or hiring a consultant to write one
- **Availability of user manuals and online tutorials**
Immediate help is already available to help you navigate the application
- **Availability of extended technical support and training**
Often provided by the vendor, this benefit is usually worth the additional cost

Because of these advantages, the State Archives recommends that you purchase off-the-shelf records management software whenever such products will meet your needs—even if you have to slightly modify your work processes.

Off-the-Shelf Database Management Software

Many organizations develop records management software applications using commercially available database management software packages, such as Microsoft Access, Lotus Approach, or Corel's Paradox. Choosing off-the-shelf **database**

management software and developing a simple records management application may be a viable option for you if:

- Your organization is already using the software for other applications
- You have staff who are familiar with the software and who have application development experience
- You can devote staff time to application development and support
- You have an in-house information technology department to develop and provide support for the application

Custom-Developed Software

If you cannot find off-the-shelf software that meets the majority of your needs, you can either write a customized application or have one written for you. Although a custom-developed application will be tailored to your organization's unique needs, there are drawbacks to choosing custom-developed software for records management:

- Although the software is adapted to meet the particular needs of your organization, adaptation can be a time-consuming process
- The application may have to be developed by available staff, taking time away from their other responsibilities
- Software development can be costly. After development and implementation, you will still have to maintain the application, as well as maintain the data within it.
- Database expertise is a requirement. If you don't have staff with database development experience, you may need to hire a consultant to do the work.
- You must develop user training for the software, including written documentation

If you hire a consultant to develop custom software, you should also sign an agreement that specifies exactly what the developer will produce, when the software will be completed, and in what form it will be delivered.

Selecting the Software

As you make records management software purchasing decisions, keep the following in mind:

- Choose software that is the right "size" and complexity for your organization

- Know what is included in the price of the software. Inexpensive software may become more costly if you include maintenance and upgrades costs.
- Test software products before you buy them. Verify how each product handles such tasks as data entry, system queries, and report generation.
- Attend vendor software demonstrations
- Arrange to visit a current user, without the vendor present, to evaluate the system
- Before you contract with vendors, check their financial stability and their length of time in business

Vendor Support

The quality of vendor support can affect the value of a software package. To ensure that what you expect in vendor support is what you receive, make sure you understand how each of the following will be handled:

- **Installation**

Determine who will do the installation: the vendor or the user

Know what the base price is and what is available for an additional fee

Understand the charges for any customization

Document each step of the installation process to show who is responsible for what

- **Training**

Know what training is provided by the vendor

Determine how and when the training will be done: by phone, on site, or at the vendor's location

- **Maintenance**

Check whether a maintenance contract is available for a fixed annual fee. The contract should include any enhancements or upgrades to the system.

The vendor should bill you for time and materials only as needed

Check to see whether a warranty is provided, what it covers, and the period of time it is in effect

Determine whether maintenance support is available by phone or on site

Check the availability of a technical service hotline

Recommendations

Records management software can create a more productive and efficient records management program for your organization. Careful evaluation of the software packages available to you will help you meet your needs. The time you spend in evaluating and selecting the appropriate software will provide a lasting payoff for your organization.

Remember:

- Test all software packages before you purchase any
- Investigate vendors before you purchase their software
- Know what is and isn't included in the price of the software you select
- Consider the long-term effects the software may have on your organization and staff. It may change your work processes or the work schedules of your staff. Job descriptions, workflow, and internal operations may all be affected.

In short, use common sense. Review your requirements. Ask questions. Buy only what you need. Build your records management program one step at a time. And remember that the State Archives can be helpful by advising you on appropriate software for your organization's needs.

For More Information and Assistance

The State Archives provides records management services to local governments, including technical advice and assistance, publications, training and presentations, and consultations with local governments concerning records and information management issues. The State Archives has regional offices throughout the state; each office has an experienced records specialist who can visit local governments and provide on-the-spot advice. For further information, contact your regional office, or:

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