

How do I Choose an Automated Tracking System for my Welfare-to-Work Program?

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Answer

For many years, mainstream welfare-to-work and employment training programs used automated tracking systems to monitor and report on participant activities. The passage of reforms such as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), Welfare-to-Work Grants Program, and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), created opportunities to work with organizations that are new to delivering services that require collecting and maintaining detailed information about program participation. These new partners include small community-based organizations, faith-based institutions and other groups. Since many of the new entrants have limited computer capacity, the tracking and reporting requirements that are routine in the worlds of welfare to work and employment and training have become very daunting for them. Often this translates into staff with very low levels of computer literacy, outdated equipment that is not suitable for running of the latest software applications, and a lack of computing infrastructure within the organization. Challenged to work with new partners having varying technical capabilities, program administration managers must pay careful attention to the major decision of selecting a client information system.

The successful simultaneous introduction of new technology and an automated client information system into any organization is an ambitious undertaking. The goal of this two-part "Questions From the Field" is to provide guidance for practitioners on how best to proceed. In Part I, we examine the issues that go into selecting a client information system. In Part II, scheduled to appear next month, we will explore practical considerations when implementing a tracking system (see QFF No. 9).

Paper, Paper Everywhere!

A basic technology need of many nonprofit organizations is an affordable, Windows-based, feature-rich, client information system that is easy to use. The system they select should allow them to replace the mountain of paper records with an efficient way to store, manage, and analyze electronically the increasing amounts of data they are required to track. Funders expect grantees to process more evaluation-quality data on skill and education levels, income levels, individual history, and services rendered. Nonprofit agencies must also be able to document changes over time, further stretching the ability of small organizations. Contributing to the paper blizzard is the tendency of staff to maintain their own caseload files, a practice that creates numerous 'islands of information' within an organization and makes it more difficult to grasp the big picture across the agency's entire caseload. Somehow, all these data must be brought together and turned into useful information to help guide program decisions. Computers are the only tools that can accomplish this.

Regardless of the business it is in, when your organization recognizes the need to implement a client tracking system, that is a good time to take a fresh look at how your agency is structured and how it works. The last thing you want to do is take your existing client information forms and transcribe them onto a computer. If there are deficiencies in your organization's data collection processes, or if your current system provides inaccurate

information, choosing the wrong computerized tracking system will guarantee only that you will end up getting bad information faster.

Understand and Get Agreement On Your Data Requirements

The advent of desktop computing and powerful new 'data mining' tools have made it easier for an individual user with modest training to build databases to meet specific needs and analyze them without having to rely on the support of technical staff. But if you want them to be fully responsive to your needs, the availability of low-cost, easy-to-adapt tracking tools does not relieve you of the responsibility to plan the information you will collect carefully and to consider how you foresee the system operating. Here are the essential steps your organization will have to take:

- ▼ Take the time to do your homework. Find out about the products that already exist on the market, and evaluate them to see if the technology can meet your needs.
- ▼ Be sure to understand the total costs involved with purchasing a client tracking system.
- ▼ If you lack the in-house expertise to evaluate technology, hire a consultant to help you to differentiate what you "need" from what you "want".

Done properly, a needs analysis takes time, and someone with the requisite knowledge has to lead the effort. Do not shortchange the organization on this phase of the project; a thorough needs analysis will yield many benefits, increasing the probability that the project will conclude successfully.

Decide whether to build a system from scratch or purchase an off-the-shelf product

This decision can come only when you have a clear idea of your data requirements and system needs. Then, you will be in a position to evaluate products that are commercially available against defined criteria. Most off-the-shelf products are not designed with your organization's specific needs in mind as to how a particular process should work or even what data elements are most important. As a result, you will have to assess whether the system meets enough of your needs to make the inevitable compromises acceptable.

If your organization decides to build a customized system that will fully meet its requirements, then clarity as to what you expect the system to be capable of achieving becomes even more important. You will have to be able to communicate to the software developer your data requirements, the system functionality you expect, and the reports you will want to generate, just to name a few.

Fortunately, it is no longer always the case that building a customized system is more expensive than purchasing an off-the-shelf alternative. You will find readily available commercial systems that range from moderately priced to very expensive, and they may be much more complicated than you need. Customized systems can be constructed at reasonable costs using development tools such as Microsoft Access, Visual Basic, or Lotus Notes. Again, there are trade-offs to be reckoned with, such as the amount of staff time that will be needed during the development period, the quality of the final product, and the availability of on-going technical support, among other things. With a clear understanding of your system requirements and data needs, you will be able to decide if a commercially available product is right for you.

Be clear about the goals you have for the tracking system

With so many potential competing needs, it is important to be as clear as you can about why a tracking system is needed and what it is expected to accomplish.

- ▼ Are you trying to meet the performance and reporting requirements of funders?

- ▼ Are you trying to help program staff stay on top of their cases or help program administrators and supervisors better manage resources?
- ▼ Is your goal to gather research data and/or document participant outcomes?

It's likely that you are trying to meet all or some of these goals. Well-designed tracking systems will serve multiple purposes — some better than others. At a minimum, the tracking system should enable you to meet your program goals. For example, knowing from the outset that the number one priority is to help employment counselors and case managers better address client needs will make it easier to explain later why you are not collecting all the data the researchers want. Client tracking systems should support the way an organization does business; the organization should not have to significantly change the way it does business in order to accommodate a particular software application.

Identify the reports and other output you will need

Users are likely to want printed reports that are tailored as closely as possible to their priorities. If your organization is properly collecting the information it wants, you should find that reporting is one of the easier functions to manage. Tracking systems built around Microsoft Access software can benefit from Access's powerful report-writing capability that lets users create new reports, as they are needed, either through a "wizard" (an automated step-by-step guide built in to the Access software), or by manually laying out the report format. Another widely available software package, called Crystal Reports, is sold as a stand-alone product. Produced by Seagate Software and compatible with any non-encrypted Windows-based database, Crystal Reports can generate reports of even greater sophistication Access can produce. Given the ready availability of excellent report writing software tools, the greater challenge than producing the reports your organization wants is to ensure that you capture the right data on which the reports are based in the first place.

In general, reports fall into three major categories:

- ▼ Individual reports that profile a specific client, summarize client activities, and can be printed and used to document a client file;
- ▼ Activity reports that are used by case managers to follow-up with clients, monitor caseloads, job placements, and similar event-driven interactions, and;
- ▼ Management reports that are used by program managers to assess employee productivity, provide analytical information on the program's caseloads, and aggregate data across the organization.

As a rule of thumb, all reports should be printable according to a specified date range. While tracking systems will generate aggregate reporting and can be integrated with other software applications, they are not designed to function primarily as organizational or financial management tools. As your organization weighs the desirability and feasibility of increasing its reporting capabilities, it is important to be mindful that there will be trade-offs of cost and operational efficiency that will have to be addressed.

Remember that tracking systems are information repositories. They can store many different kinds of information — demographic data, employment history, program participation, etc. But they will not collect data for you; they simply store, organize and report it in different formats. This is an obvious point, but it is one that often gets overlooked under the pressures to select a system and get it up and running quickly. As you are deciding what data elements you need, be clear about where the information will come from, how it will be collected, and what effort it will take to gather the data. Do not get caught up in trying to collect too much information in order to cover everything you think you will possibly need. Your clients will probably find your need for so much information intrusive, and you will create much extra — perhaps unnecessary — work for your staff. In general, staff will quickly acclimate to the use of an automated client tracking system if they see it as an efficient tool that reduces their work level. (For more information see QFF #9).

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Profiles of Available Tracking Systems

Access

Microsoft Access, also known as Access or MS Access, is one of the most “user-friendly” database management systems on the market today. Regular users of Microsoft products will find the system familiar and easy to navigate. One reason for Access’s popularity is its ability to generate forms, data tables, and reports with one software package. Jobs-Plus, an employment program that operates in six public housing developments in cities around the country, uses a client tracking system built with Access. Designed by an outside consultant, People Works, the Jobs-Plus tracking system was customized to track and report information about housing, family composition, program participation, job placement, retention, support services and benefits for each Jobs-Plus participant.

Lotus Notes

Lotus Notes is an e-mail and contact management system that creates databases and solves specific data storage needs. The Moving Up Program in South Carolina developed a Lotus Notes tracking system, called ERACTS, in order to track employment retention and client participation. Each Moving Up career consultant is provided with a laptop computer, loaded with the software, and a portable printer. Customized by a technology consultant, ERACTS stores client contact and participation information, integrates the data stored with electronic mail, allows remote and mobile users to access the system, and can produce reports and export the information to spreadsheets and other databases for viewing.

Programs and Organizations

CompuMentor: A San Francisco-based nonprofit, this organization provides other nonprofits and public schools consulting services and assistance with short-term technology projects and development of computer technology centers. CompuMentor is one of the nation’s largest and oldest non-profit technology assistance agencies. www.compumentor.org

TechSoup: Affiliated with CompuMentor, TechSoup offers technology resources, discounts, and recommendations to nonprofits. www.techsoup.org

Benton Foundation: This nonprofit organization features a “best practice toolkit” and resources to help other nonprofits improve their use communications technologies. www.benton.org

IT Resource Center: A Chicago-based organization, IT Resource Center provides on-line resources for nonprofits in the areas of philanthropy, fundraising, management, and technology. The organization’s web site features on-line publications and newsgroups. www.npo.net

TechRocks: Formerly known as the Technology Project, this organization builds technological capacity for community collaboration and citizen engagement. The web site offers ebase™, free software that enables nonprofit organizations to manage their relationships with their members, donors, activists and volunteers. www.techrocks.org

The National Urban Technology Center: Dedicated to preparing community organizations for full participation in the Information Age, the Center’s website is a good source of information on a variety of technology projects that can be locally replicated. www.urbantech.org

CNET: One of the most popular software sites on the Web, it features thousands of applications for free or at a low charge on a shareware basis. Also features software and hardware reviews, Internet-related technology primers, industry news, and much more. www.cnet.com