



Buying Your First Practice Management System

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Introduction

When buying your first computer system for your practice there are many potential routes to go down with suppliers, both large and small, all wanting your business, so it's really important to get an idea of what you are trying to achieve before you start talking to suppliers.

Give yourself enough time to do your homework so you make the right decision. Your aim should be to 'buy' the system **that you want** and not just be 'sold a system' by a good salesman.

The prices of systems vary considerably so do remember that '*...you get what you pay for*'. Setting up and supporting software and hardware is not simple so do buy from a professional, established dental system supplier – there are around half a dozen key ones in the UK. ***“Saving a few pounds early on may be a decision you come to regret.”***

This basic guide will give you some simple dos and don'ts to help you through the maze.

First Steps

It's unlikely that any system will do everything that you think you want it to do, so be realistic. In reality all the systems fulfil the same functions so ninety percent plus of what you look at will be common so it's the way it looks and how easy it is to understand that makes the real difference on a day to day basis.

It has to be relatively easy to understand and use; it means it needs less training and will get used more fully, more quickly - there's no point in having a flash whizzy system with lots of functions that no-one can understand and in the end gets under-used. Talk to friends and peers who already have a system; what advice can they give you? Would they buy the same one if given a free choice?

Once you have shortlisted the systems you want to find out more about get quotes. Perhaps the best advice of all is to make sure that when going through your quotes you compare them on a **like-for-like basis**; if a quote seems too good to be true it probably is.

There are quite detailed notes further on but here's a basic checklist to get you started:

- talk to other dentists about their systems and their suppliers and ask for their thoughts
- shortlist which systems you feel are worth having a proper look at
- think about the hardware you'll probably need
- have a proper demonstration of each shortlisted system supplier
- don't be afraid to ask about anything you are not sure about or don't quite understand
- get like for like quotes and details of all other potential costs and ongoing maintenance charges

Types Of System Supply

SERVICE TYPE	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES	COMMON DISADVANTAGES
<p>SOFTWARE ONLY Installed on local computer network</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should work on most existing modern computers and with up to date printers • If one PC fails the others should still work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues when system down and having to work with software support desk and your hardware support company - each blaming the other for the failure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You still need a good computer system with appropriate support and maintenance contract • Overall ongoing software charges and maintenance costs are often higher when added together • Dealing with multiple suppliers and support desks • Compatibility issues with printer driver and system upgrades not unknown
<p>SOFTWARE ONLY Web-based, aka Cloud service or SAAS – Software as a service</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used on most devices including tablets from any location that has web connectivity • System will be replicated and backed up across multiple cloud servers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completely dependent on broadband availability - if down it's completely unavailable • Dependent on broadband speed so a high-speed connection is essential • Uploading and downloading digital images and scanned docs' may still slow everyone's system • No direct control over "your" data • However unlikely, if cloud system fails you cannot function 	
<p>TURNKEY SYSTEM Supplying both hardware and software services as a 'One-stop-shop'</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The buck stops with the one supplier so you always know it's their problem to fix • Generally cheaper overall maintenance • Easier to build a relationship with single supplier • Common equipment supply usually means a more stable system • Potential for Rental Option 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tends to be the smaller system companies that offer this fully • NOTE - Larger suppliers tend to work with preferred hardware partners to sort of provide a one-stop solution but you still have multiple suppliers and support contracts 	

General Dos

Do:

- decide what the system must do for your business
- decide who needs to see the system demonstrations and listen to their opinions, but remember, it's your money
- make a shortlist of the systems you think fulfil your needs and ask for references from current users – and ask if you can talk to them
- put a timescale in place if you have a critical deadline like financial year for example, or date of a move to new premises – don't assume they have capacity
- ensure you get a support contract for both hardware and software – you cannot afford to have the system down for extended periods as it will be ultimately be running your business
- ask suppliers if they have preferred Internet Service Providers or specific technical requirements
- if you have to buy hardware from a different supplier to the software add it all together with the maintenance costs so you have a 'total cost of ownership' for at least three years
- do clarify what sort of hardware support is included under the maintenance contract is it:
 - fix hardware where possible but you pay for parts or replacement
 - fix hardware where possible - parts included - you pay for replacement if required
 - fix and/or replace – parts and hardware included

General Don'ts

Don't:

- be rushed into buying the first system you see – have a good look at different systems
- get 'sold a system' – buy the one YOU choose, from the company you feel most confident and comfortable with
- choose the DIY route and do it all yourself, or try to involve your local 'computer expert' friend because he or she can set it up for free or cheaply - it rarely works well in the long run. When you need support and they are still at work what are you going to do?
- do it on the cheap - get a good deal by all means, but remember - you get what you pay for and need a system that works, or it's costing you time and money
- be afraid to ask awkward questions

Hardware Dos

Do:

- decide who will need a computer
 - how many will reception need?
 - do you have an administration office? If so how many additional computers are required?
 - where can the printer(s) go?
 - how many surgeries do you have
- you already have digital X-Ray & camera equipment? Can it be integrated to practice systems (most can)?
- think about it if you don't have digital, should you consider buying it at the same time? You may get a great deal
- you want to use wireless tablets for patient input and digital signatures
- have a simple drawn plan of the areas where equipment will be situated and check the space available and where the monitor and keyboard can go
- check that power sockets are near (roughly within one metre)
- ensure that there is access for the cabling company to install the networking points – if there are potential access issues (e.g. extra thick walls) make sure the supplier is aware and get a confirmed installation price, otherwise they may treat this as extra
- make sure what is included in the quoted price and **more importantly** ask what may count as extras

Hardware Don'ts

Don't:

- buy cheap equipment - budget is rarely best in the long run
 - the profit margin on hardware is minimal to say the least so if one company quotes a particularly low hardware price it is more than likely that the equipment quality or specification is poor
 - low-spec' computers may need upgrading relatively quickly if they run out of memory or disk space, or just slow down
 - cheap printers often cost much more to run as consumables are expensive on a cost-per-page basis
 - budget printers usually have a shorter life-cycle which is fine for domestic use but not good for commercial use when volumes can be considerable
 - old technology may need replacing or upgrading sooner than more up to date systems
- install cabling yourself - it's usually part of a hardware package anyway and is best left to the professionals
- sign up to a broadband service without checking it is appropriate for the system you choose
- allow patients access to your business Wi-Fi as they could get into your computer network and do all sorts of harm; use a secondary - still password protected - Wi-Fi if you really want to give them access to the Internet. Most business broadband routers have two Wi-Fi bands and separate ids nowadays

Software Dos

Do:

- ensure you know what the different systems do and don't do
- take up the software support contract – normally paid for annually – ask if it is payable from day one, or included for an initial period
- check what updates are always included free in the support contract
- check what sort of updates and new functions would not be included in the support contract
- ask what sort of support is available – telephone, email, web-chat etc.
- ask what sort of response time is typical
- ask how their support is structured; does a customer always talk to the same team members or are you just in the queue?
- ask for the costs of other non-included items like SMS/text messages - both outbound and inbound
- check what reporting is included and if there are charges for bespoke report writing
- make sure a comprehensive anti-virus system is included on all computers – an annual licence is normally payable per computer
- ensure there is a robust backup system in place, either web-based via the internet or hardware-based – preferably both
- regularly check that backups are being done and can be accessed for restoring your system if you have a corruption
- make sure the system includes standard programs such as email, word processing and spreadsheet system as a minimum
- confirm what training is included with the system
- what is the cost of additional training if you have new staff members or just want to have refresher training to use the system better?

Software Don'ts

Don't:

- assume the system will just work - you should allow both time and money for training your staff adequately. The system supplier will normally include initial training and some ongoing training in the quote as it's really useful to have additional as users get that bit more familiar with the system - ask the suppliers how this can be done (onsite or over the web) and at what cost if not included
- buy really old technology – some systems are based on very old software that may need replacing; if you do decide for whatever reason to go with old software technology at the very least get an assurance that any replacement would be free of charges
- allow staff to install software without referral to your supplier. Additional software often clogs up start-up procedures and some programs may run permanently in the background - slowing systems down - so always check it out first
- assume you can download and/or install illegal software to save cash - it's more trouble than it's worth and often invalidates warranties and support contracts
- forget to include scanned documents and images when backing up your system, so allow for extra storage space
- get sold a load of extra functions at additional cost if you are not going to use them; you can always add things later if/when you need to

A General Bit Of Advice About Connecting To The Internet

Once you have your shiny new system you are connected to the whole world and it's tempting to ignore the fact that there are lots of ways of getting viruses and malware that can crash and reduce your system to a heap of rubbish. Anti-virus software cannot stop a user clicking on a link which may crash or disable your system – and **repair is usually chargeable**.

Nowadays staff also see it as 'normal' that they can access their social media (Facebook or Twitter for example) accounts throughout the day.

You must protect yourself and your business as much as possible.

Create a formal computer-user policy and add it to and/or include it in employee contracts so you have control over:

1. **what** personal use is and is not acceptable (including downloading)
2. **when** is it acceptable – or not
3. who can and cannot connect into your business network with personal devices via a cable or Wi-Fi - if any - this is known as a BYOD (bring your own device) policy. For personal use (if you choose to allow it at all) they should connect to the patient Wi-Fi

This **should** help save you from potential problems such as:

- o illegal downloads
- o malicious viruses, spyware, malware etc.
- o over-use of social networking sites etc.
- o additional charges for downloads over your monthly allowance

Do not wait until you have a problem, and if you are in any doubt consult an HR professional to review your employee contracts.

And Another Thing - Printers

We would always recommend a commercial level colour, multi-function Printer/Scanner/Copier with at least two paper bins so that you do not have to change paper and as some forms print on two sides or more duplex (printing on both sides) is really useful and it cuts down on paper costs. Note that you can always set the default use of the printer to just black & white (saving ink) and change it when necessary.

If you rarely use headed paper you can print it on demand as you need it, as header and footer to letters. A multi-function version printer will also allow you to scan in documents and link them to patient records.

Using The Hardware Planner

This simple spreadsheet lists all of the basic equipment that is supplied to a typical dental practice. Go through the planner line by line and work out how many computers you need and where it will all go. You then have the basic information to ask for initial system quotes and get some recommendations. Some suppliers will give you itemised pricing and some will just give a 'bottom line' price, but in reality the only thing that matters is the overall cost - including support - for running the system for say three years.

The Bottom Line

Having said all of this, you just have to accept that no system is perfect as all systems stop from time to time for all sorts of reasons. All you can do is work with the best, most professional people you can to achieve the most workable solution for you, so when things do fail you are confident and comfortable with the support offered by your supplier. End of Sermon!

SYSTEM PLANNER

HARDWARE

Computer Hardware - Server

File-Server
Backup System
Secondary Backup

No. Required

Supplier 1

Make, Specification & Unit Cost	Cost

Supplier 2

Make, Specification & Unit Cost	Cost

Supplier 3

Make, Specification & Unit Cost	Cost
WYSdom ICONic	
HP File-Server	
Automated Cloud Backup	
Backed up to secondary drive across network	

Computer Hardware - Other

Workstations - Office
Workstations - Reception
Workstations - Surgeries
Workstations - X-Ray Machines
Monitors with Integrated Speakers
Touchscreen Monitor for Patient Self-Login
Tablets for patient signatures and history updating
Colour Printer/Scanner/Copier
Appointment Card Printer
Microsoft Web Camera
Broadband Router

HP Workstations - Office	
HP Workstations - Reception	
HP Workstations - Surgeries	
HP Workstations - X-Ray Machines	
19" Flat screen Monitor with Integrated Speakers	
Touchscreen Monitor for Patient Self-Login - OPTIONAL	
Optional	
Epson Network Colour Printer/Scanner/Copier c/w Extra Paper Bin & Duplex Function	
Zebra Network Network Appointment Card Printer	
Microsoft Web Camera	
Draytek Vigor Dual-Band Broadband Router	

Network Switch
Webinar Kit - Speakers and Headset
Miscellaneous Cables
Cabling/Set-Up/Installation & Delivery
Surge Protection System
Battery Backup System
Other

Netgear 8 OR 16 Port Network Switch
Webinar Kit - Speakers and Headset
Miscellaneous Cables
Cabling/Set-Up/Installation & Delivery
Optional
Optional
Other

TOTAL HARDWARE COST

SOFTWARE

Practice Software Licences
Microsoft Office Licences - Which Version?
Remote Access Software - For Diagnostics/Dial In
Antii-Virus Software (license for each computer)
Other

WYSdom ICONic Licences
Microsoft Office Licences - Which Version
VNC Remote Access Software
Antii-Virus Software
Other

Training

On-Site Training (including travel & overnight accommodation)
Webinar Training Session(s)

On-Site Training (including travel & overnight accommodation)
Webinar Training Session(s)

TOTAL SOFTWARE COST

SYSTEM COST SUMMARY

TOTAL SYSTEM COST - HARDWARE + SOFTWARE TOTALS

Additional Costs - First Three Years - Excludes Consumables, Paper, Text Message Credits etc.

Year 1

Hardware Maintenance
Software Maintenance
Anti-Virus & Web Backup Charges

Combined One Stop Shop - Software & On-Site Replacement Hardware	

Year 2

Hardware Maintenance
Software Maintenance
Anti-Virus & Web Backup Charges

Combined One Stop Shop - Software & On-Site Replacement Hardware	

Year 3

Hardware Maintenance
Software Maintenance
Anti-Virus & Web Backup Charges

Combined One Stop Shop - Software & On-Site Replacement Hardware	

TOTAL 3 YEAR COST