

Top **5** Considerations
for Choosing
Practice Information
Management System
(PIMS)



Software Features	page 2
Hardware Requirements	page 6
Transition Process	page 8
Technical Support	page 10
Future Needs	page 12
The Bigger Picture	back cover



Top 5 Considerations for Choosing a Practice Information Management System (PIMS)

Given the speed at which technology changes, your current practice management system may not be up to current standards, or it may not support the level of technology you need in order to grow your practice. This guide provides questions you should ask as you consider upgrading to a new practice management system and as you evaluate solutions.

1

Does the system have the software features you need?

There are exciting technological advances in veterinary software. Consider these features as you evaluate systems: integration with in-house analysers, digital imaging, support for a paperless office, electronic medical records, and advanced data security and storage.



Can the new software integrate seamlessly with your in-house diagnostic instruments and with your reference laboratory?

Some systems can be linked to your in-house analysers and even to your reference laboratory, allowing you to order all tests electronically. Electronic test requests improve accuracy by eliminating handwriting errors, and they save time by eliminating the need to enter test information into multiple systems.

Many software systems can also download test results from in-house analysers and from reference laboratories directly into patient records and client invoices. This eliminates the need to manually transcribe test results, which improves medical record accuracy, saves time, and helps to prevent missed charges.

It's important, however, to distinguish between "integration" and "interfacing." Many software products claim they can "interface" with diagnostic equipment or reference laboratories—but true bidirectional (between diagnostics and practice management systems) integration will give your practice the greatest benefit.

A system that "interfaces" requires manual intervention in order to move diagnostic and other valuable data into your practice management software. Typically, a staff member must physically download the information into patient records.

A system that "integrates" automatically returns diagnostic results to patient records and records it on invoices to eliminate lost charges and ensure the most complete medical record possible.

As you compare software capabilities, be certain to ask how "integrated" the solution is with the equipment or reference laboratories you and your staff will be using. For instance, you may want to ask whether the software transmits test results in groups or individually. Individual transmission is preferred, because if the transmission fails for any reason, only one test result must be reimported.

Does the software provide digital imaging, and does it meet DICOM standards?

More and more practices are moving to digital imaging because of its many advantages. Digital images can be enlarged and enhanced to provide more diagnostic information. Digital X rays save valuable physical storage space and eliminate the expense of using and disposing of hazardous chemicals. Today, many software systems can store digital images directly to the patient record. Digital imaging also lets you take advantage of telemedicine — services that let you e-mail images for consultation, as opposed to shipping or mailing traditional films and waiting multiple days for a response.

Carefully evaluate the quality and the level of image enhancement available in the system you are considering. Make sure the software uses DICOM (Digital Imaging and Communications in Medicine) technology, the accepted standard for handling, storing, printing, and transmitting medical images. This technology is incorporated into a picture archiving and communications system (PACS), which makes it possible to manage images from various medical instruments, such as ultrasound, magnetic resonance, PET, computed tomography, endoscopy, and X rays.

Also consider whether or not the software solution you are investigating has the ability to automatically invoice for a medical image as soon as the image is saved to the patient medical record. Because of the investment required for digital radiography, it's more important than ever to understand how well your digital imaging and practice management solutions work together. Be certain that the solution supports bidirectional integration with medical records and invoicing rather than simple attachment of images to a patient record.

Does the software support a paperless or a paper-light environment?

One of the great benefits of computerisation is the ability to electronically store and retrieve information. Online records allow quick search and retrieval, as well as reduce the need for physical storage space—an important consideration in a practice environment where every inch counts.

Does the system support electronic medical records?

In the past, practice management systems were used largely for scheduling and invoicing. As the technology has evolved, practice management systems have become medically driven, with many systems now incorporating electronic medical records. One of the

main things to consider is the ability to "lock down" electronic records to comply with state regulatory and national standards, allowing you to audit the care provided at your practice.

One of the key benefits of electronic medical records is the ability to view patient care records at a glance from anywhere in the practice. Some softwares offer the ability to view care records with the use of an electronic whiteboard. Some systems also offer the ability to automatically transfer charges directly to the invoice from the medical record once the service has been performed.

Another advantage of electronic medical records is the ability to track and support compliance. Evaluate whether or not your practice management system has the ability to interface with third party software packages that enable you to outsource the printing and processing of reminder cards. Not only do such services allow you to customise the reminder cards, but they take the burden of processing off your practice so that you and your staff can concentrate on caring for patients.

What data storage and backup options are provided?

Your practice management software provider should offer a variety of data backup options to allow instant data recovery, should anything happen to your essential client, patient, and financial data. The two options for data storage are local backups and offsite storage.

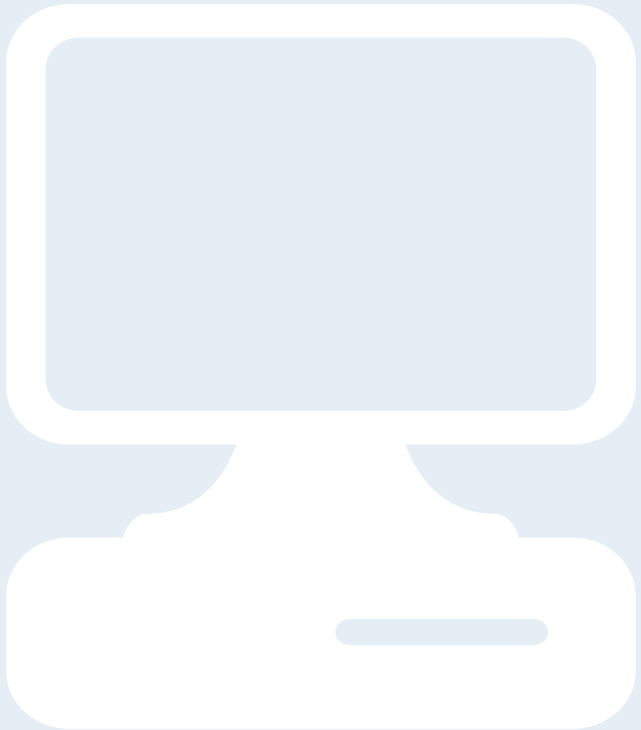
Off-site storage lets you protect your practice data against equipment failures or natural disasters. This functionality is not only critical for veterinary practices in the wake of cataclysmic events, but also in everyday events such as lightning strikes or fires. This approach to backup and disaster planning gives practices the ability to quickly recover their data and set up temporary practices.

Some systems offer specialised off-site storage services, in which data backups are sent electronically to a secured, off-site vault. These systems encrypt data using the strongest commercially available algorithm, so the data cannot be viewed as it is transmitted from the clinic to the vault. In the event that a backup recovery is needed, data can be easily restored to your clinic via the Internet or by overnight shipment of a "restore device." While stored in the off-site facility, the data is protected by a state-of-the-art infrastructure and resides in a proprietary format that is virtually inaccessible to unauthorised users.

2

What are your hardware requirements?

To get the most from your practice management system, you may need to upgrade your computers, monitors, or printers.



What specific new hardware is required? What optional hardware may allow you to gain more benefit from the system?

A new system may require a more powerful computer, a larger hard drive, or a larger monitor to display digital images or an electronic whiteboard that tracks patient progress while in your clinic. You may want to network existing computers and take advantage of specialised components that are also available, such as printers that can print digital X rays to conventional film. If you are interested in utilising diagnostic-quality digital imaging, you will need to consider a higher caliber computer that has sufficient memory/capacity to handle the large image files.

Can the software company provide and install the hardware for you?

Not all software providers offer the hardware needed to implement the new software. In this case, you should allow additional time to work with a third party to purchase the hardware. You will also need to contact the hardware provider whenever you have equipment issues.

You may find it preferable to buy from a single practice management system provider who can supply both the software and the hardware and who offers extended support for both hardware and software should any issues arise in the future.

3

How will the transition process be carried out?

Discuss implementation plans with the provider. The transition process should be designed to minimise what can be one of the most disruptive elements of the conversion process—the ability to access your data.



Can all of your existing data be converted to the new system? Can it be easily accessed and viewed after conversion?

Find out what existing data can be converted to the new system and how you will be able to view that data after conversion. Most software providers can convert the general patient and client information, but not all can convert medical history, invoicing, or service code information.

What services are provided to help you transition to the new system?

Understand clearly what resources the software provider offers to get your new system up and running and to minimise disruptions to your practice. Some software providers offer a team with a dedicated project manager who works with you and your staff to develop and execute a customised implementation plan. They may also offer the option to manually enter your existing practice information into the new system, saving your staff many hours of work.

Remember that conversion will be more complicated if your provider does not sell both software and hardware, because you will need to designate a member of your staff to manage the purchase, installation, and integration of the hardware.

What training is provided, now and in the future? What hardware and software manuals are provided?

Make sure that training and system documentation are available and that they meet your needs and the needs of your staff. Some people retain information best by reading it, others prefer hands-on training. To get the most out of your new software, consider the training preferences of your staff and ask what initial training is provided and what additional or long-term training options are offered.

4

What technical support options are available?

Technical support is essential for any new system. If a technical issue arises, you need instant access to solutions. Fast, accurate answers should be available 24/7.



What technical support programs are available and at what cost? How fast will support personnel respond to your needs?

Software providers usually offer several options for technical support, ranging from traditional phone support to Webbased support. You should consider response time and level of technical support staffing.

The response time for technical support providers ranges from 10 minutes to 24 hours. If you have a dedicated staff member who serves as the contact for training and troubleshooting, a 24-hour response time may be acceptable. To verify response time, try calling the technical support line and gauge the speed with which they answer.

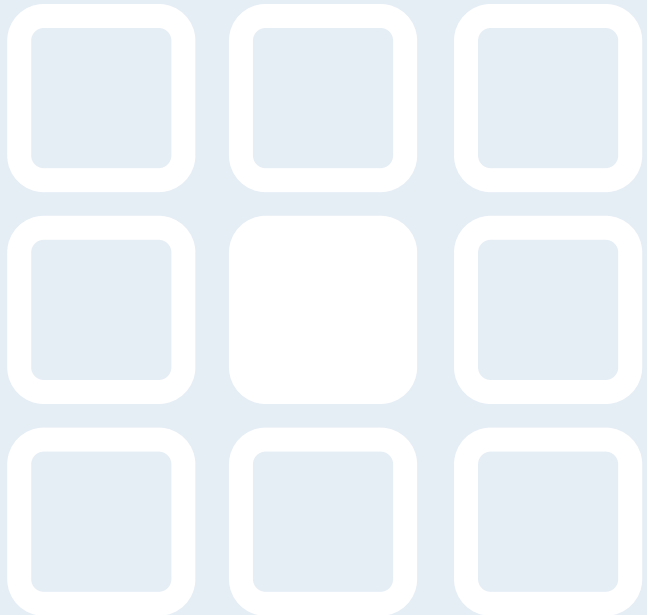
Look for alternatives or value-added support. The software provider may have an online knowledgebase with self-help tools for your staff to access when it's convenient to their schedules. The vendor may have a large enough staff to support a tiered support structure with specific technicians designated to manage escalated issues as needs arise. Be sure to ask the provider to detail how their customer support team escalates issues to get you the answers you need when you need them.

Verify the level of support the vendor offers. Some vendors only offer software support and others offer a full range of support options, including hardware and/or system support. If the vendor only offers software support it is important to identify a process for managing hardware issues. Consider the benefits to your practice of having a single support source for software, system and hardware needs.

5

Will the system meet your future needs?

Although technology changes rapidly, a new system should meet your needs for several years. The software company should provide updates to keep pace with changing technology.



How often is the software updated, how are updates provided, and who installs them? Who will train you and your staff on the updates?

Software companies distribute from 1 to 12 product updates a year. Ask how many updates you can expect and how they will be distributed. Can the updates be easily installed by your staff? Will staff need to be trained on the updates?

Practices that do not keep current on software upgrades and training can miss out on valuable new functionality and will not continue benefiting from the initial investment.

More importantly, how responsive is the software company to improving the software to meet your future needs? Is it being developed for today's users or is it helping you take your practice to a new level with the improved functionality being employed at leading hospitals and clinics? The answers to such questions will help you determine the level of confidence you can entrust to your software provider as you continue to build your business.

How reputable is the company?

Consider the company's history and reputation. How long has it been in operation? Is veterinary medicine central to its business? Will the company still be in business 5 or 10 years from now, and will it stand by its products after purchase?

While a smaller organisation may appear to provide you better "access" to leaders in their organisation, it oftentimes becomes difficult for such organisations to manage growth within their own business, let alone meet your growing practice's needs.

Choosing a provider that is part of a larger organisation can provide you with the confidence you need when making such a significant investment.

In summary: Be sure to consider the bigger picture

While not an exhaustive list of everything that needs to be considered when choosing a practice management software solution for your practice, satisfactorily thinking through the issues discussed in this guide will help prepare you and your staff to make the best choice.

Focus on functionality, and not just the "bottom line" that might appear on a proposal from potential software providers. One of the most common concerns about changing software systems is cost. The overall investment may range from under \$1,000 for a basic product to \$15,000 for multiple options with multiple workstations. Be sure to consider what the system can mean in increased efficiency and revenue for your practice over time.

A less expensive model may seem attractive, but it may not provide the technical advances you need, such as electronic medical records or test result downloads, and it may not be flexible enough to grow with your practice. Full systems that offer an integrated solution may be a few thousand dollars more than the basic product, but the productivity, compliance support, and measurement and medical record accuracy gains may save you tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars over several years. It's well worth your while to understand the total cost of ownership of your software solution and how it will support your practice now and in the future.

For more information about IDEXX and its practice management software, IDEXX Cornerstone[®] contact IDEXX Computer Systems at **1 800 655 978, option 2**
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