Supporting occupational health and wellbeing professionals

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Considerations when
Purchasing Occupational Health Software

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Introduction

It is now expected for occupational health (OH) services to use some form of electronic record management system. The right software programme will help you comply with data protection regulations, recordkeeping standards and audit clinical protocols – to work more effectively, deliver management information and, as a result, provide a demonstrable return on investment.

There are many software providers to choose from, with different configurations and technologies. Here is a guide to choosing one that suits your needs.

About the SOM

The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) is the national professional organisation of individuals with an interest in occupational health. SOM membership is for anyone working in and with an interest in occupational health.

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1. Where to start

Assemble a tight, multi-faceted and relevant team comprising users and stakeholders of the software. While solo decisions and progress are often quicker and easier, there is a significant risk (and potential cost/loss) if an OH professional makes independent decisions that impact on Human Resources (HR), Information Technology (IT), Administration and the end users. For efficiency and effectiveness, select the minimum number of team members possible, while providing the broadest knowledge base. This team should be aligned with a clear and achievable objective.

Consider other related departments

Other departments such as Health & Safety and HR will need to be involved, as they may want to have an interface with the OH system or require specific information from it. Consider what features the OH system needs to support them. If appropriate, ask the provider whether they have other software applications that could work alongside the OH solution to deliver services to related departments. Note that it may be company policy for IT to approve new software to avoid subsequent technical problems or security risks.

Users and stakeholders can help with the selection

When it comes to choosing the right software, speak with the people who will be using it. It's an opportunity to involve them, "reality check" the current selection process and incorporate feedback from a practical perspective.

Understand your users' views on the limitations of your current systems and what could improve business efficiency. For example:

- Ask your Administration team about the limitations of your current processes.
- How responsive are the support team with your current solution?
- Can changes easily be made to your current software when requirements change?
- Does invoicing take too long, resulting in decreased productivity?
- What other features would your internal users like to have? For example, OH should consider that staff with disabilities may need the software to adapt – screen reading capability, altered fonts and/or colours, etc.
- How would the systems save time and increase profitability?
- Reporting and displaying management information is increasingly important, as is reporting regular KPIs and undertaking detailed searches for specific data, hot spots stops and trends.
- The SOM is asked several times a year about data migration at the end of a contract – can records be easily exported? Does this function require an additional fee from the host provider or support team?

Asking these questions will alert you to any inefficiencies in your existing processes and what features you should look for in new packages. It will also accelerate internal support. HR, IT, Administration and other departments impacted by this software implementation will all have potentially constructive input, and employees will be much more receptive to a package that improves their workflow.

While including departments and employees can be beneficial, you need to head towards clear conclusions within specified periods. Without robust leadership, this stage could degenerate into unfocused and circular noise.

2. Context

Why do you need OH software?

You need to clearly understand why you're shopping for new software. Make a list of the challenges you would like the software to address (and solve) and then separate it into two categories: Needs and Wants.

I. **Needs:** Review your existing processes and workflows. This will help you identify your current and future software requirements.

II. **Wants:** These can be much broader. Features should be listed in order of importance, encompassing the capabilities that will make life easier. For instance, you might need a specific reporting format. Every business is unique – ensure the system you choose is flexible and customisable enough to meet most of your needs and wants. Don't forget to ask the software provider if their product can be adapted.

3. Affordability

Determine your budget

Calculate how much you can afford to spend, including any new hardware, ongoing first-year support and training, software, and recurring costs. Many providers charge additional fees when you add clinicians to the team, so remember to factor this in if you're going to use third-party specialists or OH freelancers/contractors.

Typically, there will be a need for a business case to justify the commercial validity of this project. This might just be for playing devil's advocate, though it's more likely to be for the benefit of third parties (department, committee, or the board). Where the software allows for administrative functions to be performed automatically (reminding employees of upcoming appointments, etc.), take into account the reduced admin headcount and other gains (in this case, fewer missed appointments).

What information do you need to complete this project? At its simplest, the project's benefits should outweigh its costs, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Remember the internal costs

Don't forget to ask about any internal costs that could be cross-charged to your department.

Does your IT Department levy a cost for sourcing/installing hardware or software? Will IT charge for assisting with software upgrades or integrating to single sign-on (SSO)? Likewise, does your data team cross-charge for their help?

Ask about potential additional costs

Some software providers apply additional costs to upgrade to a newer version of software, while others include upgrades in their support or subscription cost. Make sure you confirm with the provider before purchasing. Are there any start-up costs or maintenance fees? Ask your provider if there are any fees that have to be paid before getting started. And be clear on what resources are available for end user training and whether this incurs a cost.

4. First cut

Identify potential providers and software

When you have your Needs list and your preliminary budget, you should be able to quickly identify who you would like to come and give a demonstration. Every software provider should have a website, where you can review their key features and benefits. It's a good idea to pay attention to providers who are clearly designing products with the future in mind, for example if they're using platforms and technologies supported by industry leaders.

Select three to four providers that exhibit a good fit based on factors such as:

- Do they have experience working with OH teams in the UK? It sounds like an obvious question, but it's an important one.
- The size or type of business, relevant to you and your business.
- Meeting key information security criteria such as ISO 27001 and Cyber Essentials, which are increasingly mandatory for end clients in both the private and the public sector.
- Provider longevity: how long has the company been in business? Are their Companies House filings etc. up to date and showing a solid balance sheet? You need to make sure this company is going to be around for years to come – that the supplier and its product(s) are expected to remain in business.
- Depth and breadth of their product support: software that lacks ongoing customer support can easily become unusable. Be sure to ask where their support team are based – are they in the UK? If not, how good is their understanding of English and the UK OH requirements?
- Interoperability via API: the ability to communicate and integrate with third-party software packages that your organisation may use in functions such as HR. Produce scalability and evolution: focus on companies that are clearly designing products with one eye on the future, i.e. they're building products that will easily integrate with other software packages and are using platforms and technologies supported by industry leaders.
- Are there limits to how many employees or clinicians you can add to the software? Are you going to be charged more if you expand your team or use third-party specialists such as physios?
- Project implementation services and specialist subject matter expertise: look for providers who can implement the software in-house to avoid the risk of being stuck in disputes between the software provider and the implementation services provider. It's crucial to understand where the project management and software development team are based – are they in the UK or do they work in a nearby time zone? Do they speak fluent English? This will make a huge difference to how effectively you can work together in the implementation phase to customise the software.

4. First cut cont.

Additional considerations

I. Support Contracts

Before making a purchase, ask about software, support and training – is this provided as part of the contract? Who gives the training – are they an experienced member of the supplier's team who can answer the questions your OH colleagues throw at them? Ask about contracts. Some providers may not have a contract but require you to sign a support contract for a year or more.

II. Cloud-Based Infrastructure: On-Premises vs Hosted Solution

All modern software providers will host their software in the cloud so it can be seamlessly kept up to date and accessed from any device in any location. Be sure to check they host your software in the UK or EU. Auto-scaling is also important for making sure your software can cope if high numbers of users log onto the service at the same time (e.g. 9am on a weekday).

If you do decide to have the software installed on your premises, your IT team will need to keep control of the data and security. Note that in the event of a hardware failure, you will risk being left without a functioning system for your OH team.

III. Data

Provider Accreditations: Data is the most important aspect of your computer system. It's vital every potential provider does all they can to evidence that they take seriously the safety, security and resilience of your data. Ask for physical evidence of any accreditations, such as ISO 27001 and Cyber Essentials Plus certifications.

Data Protection: What password protection/entry systems are available in the system (ideally two-factor authentication or single sign-on for enhanced security), and does the system enable you to easily set up distinct levels of user access according to the role? You need to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to avoid keeping information that's not actively needed – can you selectively delete data?

Audit Trail: Is there an audit trail of all activity in the software to ensure any errors can be logged, later identified and reverted?

Data Import: Maintaining continuity of health surveillance and case referral history is of paramount importance, so make sure the software provider can import your existing clinical data.

Data Backups: Hardware can fail for any number of reasons, data can be corrupted, and computers can be lost, stolen, or destroyed. Ensure your data backups are kept for long enough in case of system failure. Do NOT let them reside on your computer. Whether you purchase a hosted or an on-premises solution, you need to understand how your data is backed up and how often.

Penetration Testing: Penetration testing is a core tool for analysing IT system security. Check the provider regularly performs penetration testing using a CREST-accredited company.

4. First cut cont.

Support Policies: Software providers can have quite different support policies, so be sure you obtain copies of their policies beforehand. Pay close attention to their Support Help Desk availability, including the process for out-of-hours requests and any associated costs. What methods of support does the provider offer (phone, email, online, face-to-face, etc.)? Are the support team based in the UK and if not, what is the standard of their English? The support you receive on an ongoing basis is just as important as the initial support. Ask to speak to other customers to find out their experiences of using the support services.

Some providers may levy additional costs for specific medical devices (audiometry, spirometry), so you need to ask.

IV. Other considerations

Does the software work on single or multiple locations? You may need to access the software from multiple locations. While this is usually possible with cloud-based software, some non-cloud providers claim their software works on multiple locations. You need to look at what's provided.

Training: If this is your first software system or you are considering a change, make sure you know what type of training will be provided. Will the training be delivered to all end users, or will there be a train-the-trainer approach? Will the training be held in an environment that encourages participation and questions?

Ask tough questions: Don't be afraid to ask potential providers why some of their customers chose to leave. Remember, every company is going to have customers leave, so don't let their answers scare you. But how they respond will let you know how involved they are with their customers and how they view themselves as a provider. Speak with other businesses who are using their software, join social media sites that have consignment/resale groups, and ask questions in LinkedIn groups.

Conflicts of interest: Ensure your software provider is an independent and neutral third party with no formal links to or financial interest in other OH businesses.

5. Evaluate

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- How well do the software products meet your Needs and Wants?
- Which software packages satisfy most of the features highlighted on your Wants list?
- Can the product expand to meet your anticipated requirements? Even if it's not in your budget now, you may be able to undertake bespoke development work or purchase add-on modules in the future.
- What product enhancements do they have planned? Are they features that will be useful to you, and how quickly will they become available?
- Does the software meet core data security protocols such as ISO 27001 and Cyber Essentials? If not, IT are unlikely to sign it off.

6. Second cut

Select the software providers that best fit you and have demonstrations of each of the products. This will allow you to familiarise yourself with the actual interface and see how some of the key functions work in real life, rather than through the prism of a marketing presentation.

Some facets to look out for:

- Simple and intuitive design.
- Is it easy to figure out how to report on the data you collect?
- Can you easily switch functions, and does the software allow you flexibility in creating new records or are you restricted to following a prescribed data entry procedure?

This is a real test of which products are going to be a good fit. You should rule out software that is under- or over-qualified for your business and narrow it down to two or three products you are comfortable with.

7. Final cut

Users and stakeholders can help with the selection. Before making your final decision, make sure you're comfortable with both the product and the vendor – you'll be spending money, and time, on implementing your new software, and you're going to have to work with it. If you feel the salesperson hasn't provided you with the information you need, don't be afraid to ask to speak with someone on the senior team.

8. Who will make it happen?

Consider appointing an internal implementation team and an internal project manager. Implementation, especially of something new, is a time of profound change and needs to be managed effectively.

Involve your IT resource (department, contractor, most knowledgeable person in the office, etc.) at an early stage to ensure the security requirements can be met, for example ISO 27001, Cyber Essentials, penetration testing, and encryption. If you're hosting the system locally, they will need to appoint an implementation team.

9. Double-check!

Review that it all makes sense – the information from both the vendor and the implementation service provider – to ensure the products you're purchasing dovetail with the services you have planned.

This should prevent gaps at the implementation stage and provide an opportunity to finalise upfront costs and ongoing costs for training, support and maintenance on a yearly basis.

Obviously if your software provider is implementing the software, then there's no risk of this gap, though you need to review their proposal to ensure their training, support and maintenance match your requirements.

10. Countdown to launch

Map out an effective and realistic timeline. Plan your implementation carefully to avoid peak times and to allow for system downtime, ensuring no data is lost during the transition period. Schedule the implementation during less stressful times and let your provider work to seamlessly transition from your old system to your new one. Remember that extensive testing and quality assurance (QA) will be required for the system to work exactly as planned. Most systems let you begin implementation at any time, without any loss of data or additional work.

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