

A Few Good Case Management Tools

Idealware intends to provide rigorous reviews of many different kinds of nonprofit software. However, it will take some time to create all these detailed reviews. Our A Few Good Tools series provides some thoughts in the meantime by recommending software that is used and liked by the Idealware community. They may not be the very best of their kind, but they have worked well for us. Perhaps they will also work for you.

Let's say one of your staff members, Linda, has a meeting scheduled in half an hour with a client she's never met before, and she'd like to understand the client's background and his entire history with your agency. Or perhaps a funder just called and asked to see a report summarizing the progress that each of your current clients has made since the time you first met with them.

If these scenarios make you break out in a cold sweat, it may be time to consider a case management system. A good case management tool will track the information you need to work with a client, such as their age, address, job history, medical history, and child care situation. It will also track all the contacts between your staff and the client, the individualized plan for your client, and the progress towards the plan. And it will allow you to report on all the information you've collected.

Advanced case management systems can do even more, such as helping with workflow and scheduling. For instance, based on the information you enter about a client, they can recommend that your client meet with a dietician, help to schedule that meeting, and send the dietician a reminder. They can also help to automate your billing processes, particularly if you need to bill government entities or insurance companies.

But it's not easy to select the right case management application for your needs. There are dozens - perhaps hundreds - of tools. Many of these systems specialize in specific kinds of human service agencies - for instance, child welfare or homelessness - and some installations can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. While we can't look at them all, in this article we round up some of the more affordable tools that are broadly applicable across a number of human service sectors.

We asked eight nonprofit database experts what case management tools they have found solid, affordable, and useful in a number of different kinds of human service settings. Their recommendations are below.

(Kind of) Free Tools for the Tech Savvy

A few tools offer case management functionality without any licensing costs. However, because case management applications almost always need to be carefully designed to meet your organization's needs, it's critical to consider upfront setup and long-term maintenance as part of the costs. You'll need the help of someone technically savvy and experienced with modeling case management databases to get started with any of these tools.

- **Excel, Access or FileMaker Pro.** If you have no budget, very simple needs, and a staff member proficient in one of these tools, creating a small case management spreadsheet or database (or at least not getting rid of the one you already have) might make sense. However, use care: the sector is littered with disaster stories of organizations that assumed that a volunteer or their neighbor's nephew could build them an effective database. Even a small case management database is not trivial to develop. How will you ensure records are secure? That it meets funders' audit requirements? This solution is likely to be as good as the person who creates it, and remain useful only as long as they're available to devote time to it. And remember you'll need to have someone on staff that can backup your data and answer questions from other staff members.
- **Metrix**, by the Fund for the City of New York (<http://metrix.fcny.org>). A free and open-source database created in Access, Metrix is a contact management database that can be configured to track key transactions with clients. It will require someone with a solid knowledge of Access and data modeling to setup, and then someone technically comfortable to maintain it and make data backups over time.
- **Salesforce** (www.salesforce.com). Salesforce is a large, powerful constituent tracking system which offers up to ten user licenses for free to nonprofits.

While Salesforce was created and continues to operate as a sales management tool for the corporate world, it has strong and growing support in the nonprofit community. The system does not have out-of-the-box support for case management, but is quite adaptable, and has a substantial community of developers creating plug-ins to extend its functionality. This is not likely to be the right choice for a nonprofit looking to setup a fast and free case management solution, but could be relatively inexpensive with the help of someone experienced with the tool, or it could serve as a good base for creating a powerful system with custom functionality.

Mid-Market Tools

There are not as many options as one would hope at the low-end of the market, so unless you have simple needs or substantial technical expertise at hand, you will likely need to look to a mid-market solution. These systems typically run about \$5- \$30K per year, depending on your requirements and number of users.

Nearly all the tools below are hosted and web-based. Our experts are seeing a notable – and positive- trend in this direction. Web-based software allows users to easily access data from multiple locations and saves considerable costs which would otherwise be devoted to hardware, extra software, data security, and backups, along with the staff to monitor these functions. Although a hosted case management vendor has physical possession of your data, a good vendor is likely to be able to keep it more secure and accessible than you could manage on your own.

- **Efforts to Outcomes (ETO)**, by Social Solutions (www.socialsolutions.com). Typically the most inexpensive of the tools in this category, although that may vary based on your needs and the number of users. ETO tracks specific results for every interaction with a client and then provides detailed reports on that information, all through a hosted, web-based interface. The system is quite flexible, allowing you to define precisely what you want to track and what options staff members can choose from. Social Solutions is a well funded company and thus likely to be relatively stable for the long term.
- **Community Tech Partners (CTK)** (www.communitytech.net). CTK provides solid

and customizable functionality in a hosted, web-based system. The product is essentially a blank canvas out-of-the-box, which means it may take longer to support straightforward needs, but might be faster to customize for those with unusual needs.

- **ServicePoint, by Bowman Systems** (www.servicept.com). ServicePoint has a strong base of customers in the Homeless Management Information Systems arena, but is also widely applicable to other social service situations. It is also a hosted, web-based system, and is also fairly customizable. ServicePoint offers a billing module to streamline the process of billing government agencies for services provided.
- **ClientTrack, by DSI** (www.clienttrack.net). Similar to ServicePoint and ETO, ClientTrack is a hosted, web-based, flexible application, with an emphasis on interface ease of use. Users are required to use Internet Explorer as their browser.
- **MetSYS** (www.metsysinc.com). In addition to a web-based hosted solution, MetSYS offers a version of the software that is installed on your own servers. MetSYS is also one of the oldest and most established tools. It's powerful and customizable, though several contributors mentioned that they wished it were more flexible. They offer two levels of service, "Light" and "Enterprise".
- **Evolv-CS, by Defran** (www.defran.com). Defran is a user-friendly and full-featured hosted, web-based application. It has a core model that includes a record for every person, including case workers and relatives as well as the client themselves. It's a bit more expensive than the other tools above, running about \$25K - \$50K per year.
- **Service Xpert Suite, by Unicentric** (www.unicentric.com). Unicentric offers a sophisticated web-based solution for larger organizations. They have a broad base of clients in the governmental and private hospital sector, as well as in the nonprofit space. Similar to Evolv-CS, it costs about \$25K - \$50K per year.

And Beyond...

As mentioned above, this article focuses on lower and mid-priced tools that are broadly applicable across a number of human service sectors. But that certainly doesn't include the whole case management marketplace. If you have more sophisticated needs, you'll need to look beyond these applications to the

wider world of powerful and more expensive solutions. If your programs concentrate on a particular, widely recognized area such as homeless management, child care, health services, or the like, also consider tools that are geared specifically to your type of work.

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Full disclosure: One of the vendors in the market covered by this article has expressed interest to Idealware in funding a future Idealware report. However, we are as always committed to providing candid and impartial information. While the primary author of this article was aware of the identity of this vendor, the contributors and the person who decided which tools should be recommended based on contributor information were not aware of this vendor's identity.