

TIPS AND TRENDS

When you hear the term “computer maintenance management software,” or CMMS, (think work orders, preventive maintenance, inventory, etc.), you might think of some monstrous and expensive software program that a smaller organization couldn’t afford in its wildest dreams, much less use effectively. In some instances, you would be right. However, there are affordable options available to all different sizes of organizations; there’s even some “free” software floating around out there on the Internet. The trick is to know what you’re getting into.

You might ask why you would even want to consider a computerized program in the first place. For any number of reasons, such as:

- Create electronic stored records of work performed at your property
- Reduce paperwork by utilizing wireless devices to receive work requests
- Increase response time and accountability to your customers
- Increase accountability within your organization
- Keep up with technology
- Replace an old outdated system
- Create a standard procedure for work requests, preventive maintenance, etc.
- Demonstrate asset maintenance to lenders, buyers, JV partners, etc.
- Create online support for bill-backs

First and foremost, the most important part of your search for maintenance software is to involve those employees who will be affected by it. If your organization is too large to involve everyone then select a representative group of people across all disciplines. By involving those who will be working with the software on a regular basis, you have taken a great step toward employee “buy-in.” You have also just assembled your own

group of experts to help you by bringing their perspective to the process. Utilize these experts throughout your purchasing experience.

Before you even start looking for software you should sit down and make a couple of lists. The first list isn’t actually a list, but a set of flowcharts. Take some time and write out how you

How to Begin Your Search for a Computerized Maintenance System

By Crescent Real Estate Equities, Ltd.

currently handle the process or processes you want the software to address (e.g. tenant work requests, inventory, purchasing, preventive maintenance, etc.). Then make a similar flowchart of how you would ideally like the process to work utilizing software. The flowcharts don’t need to be anything fancy or formal, but they will give you a good starting point in assessing your needs as you begin looking for software.

The next list should be what you want from the software. This list should include processes like wireless capability (getting work orders on a wireless device), ability to integrate the software with your accounting software (to streamline billing) and the like. You should have a good idea of this from the flowcharts you just made. Break your needs into categories such as: deal-breakers (things you must have); flexibility-points (things you want but can be flexible about), and icing (things that would be nice if they were available). Use this list to quickly categorize the offerings of the software you find.

You may or may not already have a budget in mind before you start making any kind of list. In any event, be aware that there are numerous costs can incur

above the cost of the software itself:

- Additional software/equipment – Know what you need to install the software. Can you install it and run it on desktop PC’s? If so, do your PC’s meet the minimum system requirements of the software? Do the PC’s need to be networked? If not, do you need a separate server...separate database (e.g. SQL, Oracle, etc.)? Keep in mind that there are services out there that will host the software and database for you, so all you need is an internet connection.
- Software seats – This charge pertains to the number of concurrent users you can have logged into the system. For example, you might have 50 employees who could use the system, but only 20 of them would be logged on at any one time.
- Maintenance fees – This is typically an annual fee which could encompass technical support, software updates and/or software patches. If you use a hosting service, you might avoid this cost.
- Training – Depending on the software, you may need to send a number of your employees to training on the new software (which can be out-of-state). The types and varieties of training available are as varied as the software themselves.
- Consulting fees – If your software is more complex, you would be well-advised to invest in consulting services; whether from a third-party or from the software developer.

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Many software systems that are large enough for you to benefit from utilizing consulting services offer those consulting service as well.

- Per call fee- For those of you interested in systems which will allow your customers to log on and submit a work request via the Internet, there are services that will not only host your software, but will also act as a call-center gateway for your tenants. You could be charged a fee based on the volume of calls coming into the system. Be sure to balance this cost out over time to see if you're actually getting your money's worth.

With regard to expectations, be sure to have a good idea of what you're looking for in a software, and why you're looking for it. However, it's important to remain flexible as you wade through the myriad of choices. Your needs and demands may fluctuate the further you venture into committing yourself and your organization to this useful tool.

In addition, if you have or want the capability to permit your tenants to submit work orders via the Internet, have realistic expectations of the number of work orders you can actually expect from Internet submissions. For example, Crescent Real Estate Equities, Ltd. discovered that, on average, 7% of their total number of customers are responsible for requesting 50% of the total work orders. Although your tenants can experience great benefits (such as tracking the progress of their requests in real-time), it might be more trouble for some of your customers to remember login information than to give you a call. But always give them the opportunity to make the choice.

Finally, the key to our business is customer service. Make sure whatever software or system you select will help further your goal of servicing your tenant in an efficient and convenient manner; whether that is increasing response time, increasing flexibility, or simply allowing you to better maintain your building equipment. Remember that change challenges all of us. By keeping your employees involved and informed throughout the buying process, you are making it that much easier for them in the end when you've made the final decision.

Crescent Real Estate Equities Company (NYSE:CEI) is one of the largest publicly held real estate investment trusts in the nation. Through its subsidiaries and joint ventures, Crescent owns and manages a portfolio of more than 75 premier office properties totaling more than 30 million square feet, located primarily in the Southwestern United States, with major concentrations in Dallas, Houston, Austin, Denver, Miami and Las Vegas. In addition, the Company has investments in world-class resorts and spas and upscale residential developments.