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## Backing up case management with software

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**Intuition Software's Paul Eastman gets technical, explaining the ins and outs of an underused resource - workers comp software.**

Some people describe return to work as project management with love....

Coordinating the return to work of a number of people requires knowing where each person is in their program, the next steps, and tracking the case. Workers' compensation and return to work activities are resource intensive and bound by red tape, regulation and compliance.

Perhaps, like many organisations, you have developed your own series of spreadsheets to assist in the myriad of calculations, formulas and check boxes needed to ensure you act according to the rules.

Most spreadsheets and forms are developed for a specific need or purpose. They generally don't 'talk' to each other, to your workers' compensation agent or, for that matter, to your payroll or finance department.

Somewhere in the loop it becomes easy to lose track of who is back at work, when medical certificates expire, when Return to Work Plans need amending, what you should pay and reconciling what you get back.

Add to this the frustrations of having to find or retrieve records and details long forgotten, and software solutions become a sensible option. All the information is in one place, accessible by several people for several purposes, and can be compact enough to carry around or be viewed from remote locations.

Statistical data can be obtained at the touch of a button.

These days it seems everyone wants to sell you some kind of wiz-bang software program that will ease your life forever, remove the stress and, well, perhaps even make you a cappuccino while you wait (one sugar in mine thanks!).

Return to Work and Claims Management Software applications can cost anything between around \$1500 up to about \$250,000.

How do you know how much you need to spend?

Applications with multi-jurisdictional, or even public risk and other insurance related capabilities are right at the top end of the scale. Generally these products are developed with multiple filters and security profiles that should enable a wide range of users to simultaneously do just about anything: you should expect a full OHS/incident/risk management/claims management and return to work product; automated email, templates, auto populated fields, payment calculators, return to work compliance assistance, and reminders.

You really need to be large corporation, even an insurance company, with high rates of incident and claims lodgement to justify such an expense. At this level do not compromise on what you want. If it is not included, get it included or go somewhere else.

At this level you should also think about whether you want a third party-hosted, web-based server product or an in-house server-based model as your starting point. More on this below.

If you want claims management and return to work functionality only in a product with the same filters and security profiles as the 'burger with the lot', the field narrows somewhat, but the budget won't be hit nearly as hard. Spending between \$75,000 and around \$140,000 should satisfy your needs.

Some products come in modules that you can include or exclude at your discretion. This space is filled in the main by products that aim fairly and squarely at the self-insurance market, and the odd government department.

The significant price gap from the mid-range to the lower levels results in surprisingly little difference in functionality. The differences mainly are in the type of product available, and in choice between desktop or third party-hosted web-based products.

Web Based server products use a third party organisation to 'host' or house your data, meaning that you do not have to worry about storage. From a resource point of view this is an attractive proposition. However, you have little or no control over the security of your data host server, or even internet access itself. If something goes wrong at their end, you may find yourself without access to your data. If you choose to end your relationship with the developer who is probably not the host server (generally this would be outsourced by the developer themselves), you could easily find yourself in a legal scrap to access your own data.

If you want absolute control and ownership of your own data, third party-hosted, web-based applications may not be for you. Make sure the developer, and host server are fully prepared to sign legal documents relating to ownership of your data; otherwise, you may be better off steering clear.

In-house server-based products are a secure way to store data. You own the data and you control access to it. You will never end up in a legal dogfight with a third party. If you are a large organisation needing simultaneous users, security filters, access levels and so on, this could be the best option. Cost, storage space requirements and system maintenance considerations would summarise the cons of this type of application. It sits on your internal network and therefore may require your IT department's ongoing involvement.

Desktop-based applications are by far the cheapest option. The application is installed onto each user's PC, with the database itself stored on your internal network for access by multiple users, or portable for lap top use (the database itself is likely to be small enough to carry around on a USB 'Flash-Drive').

Again, the advantages are that you own and control access to the data. This type of application may allow only one person to edit data at any one time, with other users limited to viewing data only. For small to medium sized organisations this type of application can be ideal, and very cost effective.

Generally you will pay an upfront installation fee for any software application. You will also probably pay an annual licence fee that should provide you with free customer support (if not, ask why). With third party web-based models you can also look forward to monthly maintenance fees as well.

Know what you need to use the application for, and don't assume you need to pay through the roof. You may get away with a much cheaper option. Above all, make sure the software will save your staff time and not create more work for them.

[Paul Eastman has been involved in the workers' compensation industry for over 25 years in a number of roles, including Authorised Agent State Operations and State Claims Manager. He has been involved in Regulatory Working Groups and Committee forums, and is a founding director of leading workers' compensation consultancy, CES Consulting. In 2003 Paul formed Intuition Software, specialising in workers' compensation software applications. ]

