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**Time Management Systems: Helping you to
make an informed choice**

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Introduction

Buying any new business system can be a tricky process with large investments of time and money at stake. It's not unusual for a business to buy a system only to find that six months to a year down the line it doesn't really meet their needs.

The right Time & Attendance system can save you time, reduce errors, build trust, drive change and, most importantly, quickly start paying back your investment whilst adding value to your business.

The wrong system can have the opposite effect; wasting time across your business, damaging relationships and can ultimately prove even more costly to rectify.

All Time & Attendance systems are not created equal. There are small "out of the box" systems, huge bespoke systems, well designed systems and poorly designed systems. There are simple systems that 'do what they say on the tin' through to more complex systems that will grow with your business.

This report aims to point you in the right direction and to provide you with a number of key questions to ask both yourself and your prospective suppliers. They will help you focus on what is important to you, cut through the sales pitch and get the right answers so you can make an informed choice for your business.

How can you ensure that your organisation selects the right system for your business?

1. Confirm you're ready for a new Time & Attendance system: Ask yourself some hard questions

Before you even talk to any suppliers, there are questions you should ask yourself. The most important ones are:

- What do we want a new Time & Attendance system to do for us?
- What are the things that we're not doing as well as we want, and how will they be done better with a Time & Attendance system?

It could be a whole range of things, but having a clear idea of what they are and what you want to achieve by the end of the process is a great place to start a discussion with potential suppliers.

This will also help you identify suppliers who are not just going to sell you a system – but are going to work with you to create the right solution and to solve problems.

Identifying key areas for improvement will also help you set a realistic budget for your system, as you will have started to identify the business benefits you are aiming to achieve and the costs associated with them. All good software (and hardware) related investments should be self funding in the long run, so you should be clear from the outset of the Return on Investment (ROI) you are expecting from yours.

Focussing on what you really want to change will also help you avoid being swayed by flash functionality that you are never going to use. If you are a smaller business looking for an easy to use system that will streamline your business, you don't want to be locked into lots of consultancy and customisation that you don't need just because it's included in the package.

On the other hand, if you are a larger company with a large workforce operating a wide range work patterns across multiple sites, you will need to make sure that the solution is scalable and flexible enough to meet your needs and be able to deliver an acceptable ROI.

It pays to remain open minded at this stage. An experienced provider should be able to recommend features that you may not have thought of, or considered, which when combined, will provide the perfect solution.

To summarise, you are looking to establish a list of objectives, not a tick list of features – your supplier should be able to demonstrate how their systems features will achieve your objectives.

2. What to look for when selecting your new Time & Attendance system

A great Time & Attendance system can have wide reaching effects across your whole company so it's well worth taking into account and examining the needs of other stake holders to ensure you're going to get the greatest benefit.

What would be the best way for employees to access the system – at clocking-in machines, online or maybe via a handheld device like a mobile phone? It could be that a combination of these would be most effective so this will help refine your supplier search to those companies who can accommodate this.

What about the people who will administer the system? Will this just be your own team, or will team managers throughout the company be responsible for administering the data for their own teams? This can be a really powerful way of improving the quality of your Time & Attendance data while giving team managers ownership of the system.

But be aware, it will also mean you need to look for a system that is designed to make team managers' lives easier - present them with a system that makes them wade through fields of irrelevant data and not only will they not thank you but they also won't use it, resulting in a wasted investment.

Look for a system that allows you to filter access and information by department, team or individuals so your team managers only need to deal with the data that is relevant to their role.

Look for systems described as "Multi-Site" but be sure to thoroughly investigate exactly how the system helps manage data effectively for larger firms.

Does your business have any unusual quirks? Many firms have shift patterns or payment categories that are unique to them. Consider whether you are prepared to adapt the way you work to the system, or whether you would rather invest in a system that is adaptable to you? Levels of customisation vary from system to system. Some systems can be easily customised by the user, others may need to go back to the developers - which will incur additional costs – while towards the lower price end it may not be possible to customise the system at all.

It's also seriously worth considering if the way your business works now is how it would like to work in five years time. Do you need to

look for a system with the scope to grow and develop to meet changing business needs? It could even be that you select a system that is a catalyst for change, for example the introduction of a flexible working system or demand based-rostering.

You now know you should find a supplier that has experience in this area and can help ensure your system supports the change.

3. How should I assess all the products and suppliers?

All Time & Attendance systems are not created equal. The same can be said for Time & Attendance suppliers. Some suppliers develop and sell their own systems. Others re-sell systems from a range of different development companies. There are advantages to both, but some of these options can also present you with problems down the line.

Full service companies have complete ownership of the software development process and the associated quality control. In the event of any issues with the software, their support team will have direct access to the staff that developed it. They can generally make system amends themselves.

Re-sellers often have lower overheads, as they don't need to support the costs of a development team. Arrangements can differ as to who supports the product after the sale. It could be the re-seller, or you may be referred back to the original development company. The re-seller would normally have to go via the development company to get amendments made to the software.

Before you decide which type of supplier to choose it is worth considering the following:

- After-sales support – is the company who sells the system going to provide the support or will it fall back to the developers? Where is the support desk based and can they provide the response times and service levels you need? How are support staff trained on the system and how is their knowledge kept up to date? Do they only support one type or brand of system, or systems from lots of different suppliers?
- Development and bug fixes – who is responsible for making changes to the system, either to provide new functionality or to correct problems? You need to clearly establish who your point of contact will be and what service levels you can expect. If you opt for a company with an in-house development team it is still worth checking that they can make system amendments within a reasonable time scale.

Beware – even “in-house” teams may not be UK or even Europe based – if in doubt, ask.

Suppliers will list all the features and benefits of their own solutions, what you need to do is compare each against your list of requirements until you have it whittled down to a select few. These can then be examined in more detail and pitted against one another.

4. What is the likely lifespan of a system?

Time & Attendance, like all software, will go out of date over time. Changes will need to be made to reflect updated legislation and new technology. When choosing a supplier, consider how they handle system upgrades as this can impact considerably on both the useful life of the system and the total cost of ownership.

A good supplier should keep your system current by sending out updates via CD or allowing you to download them, but costs can vary. Check what level of support is available to assist you in making more complex updates and what the cost would be.

A word of warning: some companies place their customers on contracts that oblige them to pay for system upgrades after a certain period, increasing the cost of ownership. Whilst all companies must make old versions of software eventually obsolete, some withdraw support much sooner than others. Check that the choice to upgrade will be yours and not the supplier's.

5. How should I interpret the jargon?

You shouldn't have to - beware of the buzzword!

There is always a new crop of buzzwords being banded about for the latest system "must have". Current hot terms include Workflow, Self-service and Integration.

Unfortunately these buzzwords often lack a standard definition, so how a supplier may define a term and the way you define it could be quite different. If a supplier hides behind a wall of jargon ask yourself just what it is they're hiding? The best way round this is to ask for specific examples or a demonstration of the feature that clearly shows how it would be of benefit to you.

Ask to speak to a couple of their customers to find out more about whether the features of the system will meet your requirements.

Many companies can offer you an online demonstration. This can be a really convenient way of finding out more about a feature that interests you, without the commitment of a sales visit

6. When should you expect to begin seeing a return on your investment?

One of the factors in your decision to implement a new Time & Attendance system is the desire to see a measurable benefit to your business. Perhaps you are looking to reduce overpayment, free up a number of hours for your payroll team or reduce absence.

Many suppliers can give you an indication of the return on investment you can expect based on their experience with previous customers. Bear in mind that old adage: if something looks too good to be true it probably is. Ask how the ROI was calculated and satisfy yourself that it is realistic for an organisation of your size, paying a similar average salary, in a similar sector. It should also be possible to speak to existing customers in your sector to confirm the potential savings.

If it is important for your organisation to see ROI early on, consider choosing a supplier with a leasing option that allows you to spread the cost of the system. A well calculated lease agreement should allow you to start seeing a saving to your business as soon as the system is live. Some suppliers will even allow you to match the level of your payments to the peaks and troughs of your business.

7. Ask about Implementation and Project Management

How will your chosen supplier go about installing your new system? Will the schedule fit in with your availability and what deadlines will you be expected to meet?

To get the best from a larger system you will need to be prepared to spend some time working with the company to define how you would like the system set up. Some companies are able to do much of the set up for you right through to setting up records and inputting data, whilst others will expect you to handle this yourselves.

If you are looking to get a system in to a tight timescale, or you only have limited resource, it could be worth seeking out a supplier who can offer a turnkey solution – getting the system fully set up with minimum time commitment from you.

8. Ask about initial user training and ongoing support

If you are looking to buy anything more than a straightforward clocking system, you will almost certainly benefit from some training to help you get the best from your new system.

With a larger system you will probably have a number of users with different training needs; there will be your system administrators and master users who will need to gain an in-depth knowledge of

the system and probably to know how to modify and adapt the system for future use; there may be line managers who will only use the system for certain key tasks and won't have the need or the time to have the full training; and there will be the users who may need to know how to enter or check their own details.

It is worth investigating whether your preferred suppliers can provide the different levels of training you need. Some companies will even train your own training team so you can handle the rollout to employees yourself. This is a very cost effective option if you are looking to train a large number of people over a number of sites.

Take into account that people move on in all companies; investigate how a supplier would help you train a new user or give refresher training. Online training, self teaching tools and comprehensive documentation could be real money savers when you need to get new team members up to speed in the future.

9. What information will I get it from the system? (Reporting)

No doubt one of the most powerful reasons for investing in a Time & Attendance system is the information it will provide about where your company's payroll bill goes. These reports can form the basis of programmes to reduce absence, allocate shifts more effectively, manage flexible working or reduce a reliance on overtime.

However the reporting suite can also be the Achilles heel of some systems, making it time consuming and difficult to get meaningful information out of the reams of data you collect.

A good reporting package should have most of the reports you need provided as standard. These can even include complex calculations to help you comply with the Working Time Directive or the Bradford Factor, which helps you identify the individuals whose absence costs your business the most. It should be simple to start extracting valuable business orientated data from the system soon after it has gone live.

Ask your prospective supplier to show you their standard reports and to demonstrate how unique reports can be created if required.

10. Where can I see the system in action?

By the time you get to this stage you will probably have read all your supplier's brochures, visited their website and met their sales team, but how can you be sure that the system and the supplier will really deliver for an organisation like yours?

Ask to speak to some of their existing customers in your area and industry sector. This can really help you to get a feel for how the

system works in reality and whether the supplier offers the level of service that you would be looking for.

Existing customers can also give you a good indication of the amount of time and effort that was required to get the system up and running and if there are any pitfalls that you should be aware of.

The range of references a supplier can offer also gives you a good indication of how established they are and what experience they have in your sector.

Summary

So to summarise there are quite a few questions that you need to ask potential suppliers to discover exactly what their system does, the service levels they can provide and what value and benefits their system will add to your business.

But perhaps more importantly are the questions you can ask of your colleagues, stakeholders and staff to establish exactly how they would like to work now and in the future. Establishing a clear set of outcomes right at the start makes the entire process easier to manage.

The answers to these questions will be invaluable in helping you select a system and a supplier that will offer you a great return on your investment year after year.

About Mitrefinch

Mitrefinch invented computerised time and attendance and are established world leaders in Time & Attendance systems. In the early 80's Mitrefinch developed the idea that businesses could use software to revolutionise the manual process of "clocking in". Mitrefinch even earned its five minutes of fame on Tomorrow's World.

But we didn't stop there. We have quietly spent the last few decades pushing forward what is possible for a time and attendance system. Along the way we have earned a string of awards, and more importantly built a large base of satisfied customers.

Currently employees in over 2500 companies all over the world "clock on" using a Mitrefinch system. From concrete fabricators in Toronto to zookeepers in Hertfordshire to the First Minister of the Scottish Government, more and more companies each day are deciding that we are the right supplier for them.

This means that we are speaking to hundreds of organisations every week who are looking to improve the way they manage their work

time data. We listen to concerns, take on board suggestions, make recommendations and answer questions.

Sometimes these organisations are looking at a system for the first time to replace a manual system. Sometimes they are looking to replace an existing system that simply doesn't meet their needs.

This guide is based on our experience with these organisations – the questions they asked, the questions they forgot to ask and the questions they didn't even know they needed to ask.

So Mitrefinch would like to thank all the organisations we have spoken to in the last 28 years – especially those who had to learn the hard way. We hope you find our experience useful.

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