Written by Blaine L. Pardoe, Enterprise Management Systems
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As we enter the third generation of computerized maintenance management systems (CMMS) in the marketplace, this question is posed more and more by companies and the software sales reps attempting to hock their wares. There are some fairly savvy maintenance department personnel, and their numbers are growing. However, there are some who are often beguiled into making the wrong decision when it comes to upgrading their old CMMS. So here are some rough guidelines if you think, believe, or are being told that you've outgrown your current CMMS. Each item is broken down by the symptom and some things you should check first--before you purchase.

Symptom: Your CMMS has become too slow.

This can occur for several reasons that have nothing to do with your CMMS software. First, when was the last time you archived old work orders? If your system is bogged down with 75,000 old work orders, a software upgrade is not going to help. Most reputable CMMS provide for the archiving of old work orders.

Also, what has changed recently? Is your server now handling more PCs than before; are there other applications on the network that have been added that might impact the speed of your network or your server? One of our clients installed a DOS-based application on their non-dedicated server. Every time they fired up their old spreadsheet software, the speed of the CMMS dropped by 50 percent. They were convinced it was the CMMS until shown otherwise.

Also, is your CMMS database engine being used by other software applications? Sometimes you're not just sharing your server, you're sharing your database as well. If it's tuned to work well with one application, it can have an impact on your CMMS. You also can suffer performance issues if the other software is causing a significant number of hits on the engine, cutting down on the amount of processing time left for you.

Symptom: Your CMMS doesn't have features that others do.

CMMS vendors are always adding new bells and whistles, and sometimes people feel behind the times with their current application. That's a typical feeling and may very well be founded; however, there are a few little things that you should check first.

Have you been keeping your current CMMS up to date? Almost all vendors offer a

maintenance program for their software to ensure that you get bug fixes, new version of the software (with--surprise, new features!), etc. However, what often happens is that in budget cutting somewhere along the lifespan of the software, someone decides not to renew the maintenance on the CMMS. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but can leave you with an out-of-date application.

What about re-training your staff on the software? Most CMMS training is done in the same manner a bad gene is passed on--it is done by an employee (now long gone and retired in Barbados) who trained a handful of people, who trained a handful of people, and so on. Each generation of training lost more and more of the skills until they sometimes reach the point where the staff is convinced the CMMS is nothing more than a work order engine. Sometimes when you're convinced your CMMS can't do something, you need to crack open the manual to find out if it's possible in the first place.

Also, are the new features you've read about in brochures, etc., really going to add to your maintenance department's productivity, or do they just look good? This is the old adage of being the sizzle, not the steak. You get the idea that the new functionality will be a big help, when in reality, it's not practical for your operation.

Symptom: Your CMMS doesn't work with other company applications.
The CMMS as an enterprise-wide application is not a new concept, but often not implemented correctly. Also, the maintenance department often is on the low-pecking order for new software, meaning that the accounting, purchasing, or enterprise management software your CMMS used to connect with has been upgraded or changed while your CMMS remains the same. That, or you never attempted to integrate your CMMS to any other application(s).

First and foremost, check with your current CMMS vendor and see if they allow or can provide integration to whatever software you want to link up with. More often than not, the larger vendors are more than willing to do so if you can specify what that linkage needs to be and how it will work.

By looking at these basic symptoms and taking the necessary steps to ensure that you really do need an upgrade of your current CMMS, you may be able to save significant dollars, time, and expense. **MT**