Why Software Support for Facilities Management is Crucial for Success

When considering facilities software, what is most important - the software or the support? The answer may surprise you. If the support and goals of your implementation do not align, your software declines in value over time. In addition, the level of support must match organizational objectives.

Let us look at a couple of examples for clarification. A company decides to purchase a space management application with basic support. The goal is to better manage space, then add building and asset management applications. The selection of basic support was justified based on cost. Because the integrity of space data was solid, internal staff were tasked with setting up the space application. The project succeeded. Six months later, the decision was made to move forward with asset and work order management. In these application areas, no legacy information existed. No data standards existed for assets. Workflow processes for on demand work were not documented. It is at this stage of your project that the long-term value of your software is at stake. If you forge ahead on your own, the project will face an increasingly daunting list of questions. Unable to tap into the best practices for these areas, the outcome is unlikely to achieve efficient outcomes.

Without a professional level of support, the likelihood of a successful outcome is low. Your goal of managing assets and work orders requires a team that knows the best practices of the industry. A second example considers a company goal of reducing yearly departmental costs by 15%. With proper support, improvements to your facilities software could help you isolate hidden costs. These examples illustrate the importance of software support.

Hourly Support

Hourly support is as close to no support as you get. When something goes wrong, you call a help desk and get billed hourly. For enterprise software, this approach places your organization in a reactive position. As thing happen, your team is forced to make phone calls. In some cases, this model could be application specific.

However, under this model the vendor is unable to develop a relationship with you. It is the software equivalent of buying an expensive car with no warranty. Since facility managers work within department budgets, hourly support costs need to be kept to a minimum. Consequently, hourly support prompts managers to spend time and internal resources on technical issues. This activity takes them away from doing the job they were hired to do.

Basic Support

Basic support is common for off-the-shelf or cloud-based software. The support team is not likely to have a grasp of your business or profession. The roles associated with this support tend to be entry-level IT personnel. This support is important and does have its place. If you cannot log into your software experience data loading problems, entry-level staff are helpful. The low cost of this tier of support makes it desirable for some organizations. As an added layer of expertise, basic support is often coupled with hiring internal application support personnel.

Application Support

At this level, support personnel possess training related to your facility applications. Because of the complexity of certain applications, better trained technicians are necessary for optimal performance. The benefit in this tier is some technicians will understand the terminology of your profession. However, this support is limited to keeping the application running and helping with basic navigation.

Professional Support

Professional support programs require a working relationship with your vendor. The vendor should demonstrate a solid understanding of your business. Serving as your consultant, the goal of the vendor is to ensure you maximize your software investment. Service organizations often advertise their relationships with clients. Describing themselves as a trusted partner they claim to be part of your team. How do you evaluate these claims from a vendor? One question to ask is whether trained experts are available on a regular basis. A single point of contact should be assigned to your team. In addition, the vendor should be versed in your industry and understand trends in workplace management.

The vendor needs to offer insights that go beyond the software itself. It is important to emphasize that this support tier does not exclude the lower levels of support.

Professional support includes technical phone support and application assistance.

In this model, you receive consulting, account management, and technical customer service. Consulting from people familiar with your industry and profession is the most important variable. As advisors, the vendor provides information about the software. They alert you to trends in the industry and best practices. For example, advice on numbering rooms and signage for first responders is an area where your provide can help. Information in this area improves your risk management practices. Other examples of valuable guidance include creating room categories and classifying work orders. Both areas concern ensuring facility practices conform to organizational needs. Finally, they give guidance on upgrades to enhance features and functionality.

This may seem elementary but first let us define the purpose of software. I am old enough to remember working in offices without computers. Most people take it for granted that software is necessary to do their jobs. Today, it seems strange to think of an office without computers. But computers are ubiquitous on desks today for a reason. The simple fact is that it is more cost effective and productive to do your job with a computer than without. Therefore, the purpose of all computers and software is to save money and improve productivity. If your software fails meet these basic goals, then something is wrong.

Costs

When selecting software and support packages, it is difficult to economize. Deals or discounts should not guide your decision. Since software is a tool to increase efficiency you want to make sure it is adequate to the task. However, it is difficult to determine suitability from a list of features. Therefore, you need to choose your support service firm – before you choose your software. Talk to potential vendors about implementation and support, not just software features. It is important the vendor support the implementation of the software. They are the experts and need to guide you through this from the beginning. A well-executed implementation will reduce

problems down the road. There is one question the potential service firm should answer for you. Why should you select them as your vendor? The answer you want to hear is

one that makes you feel like they understand your needs as a company. This type of answer goes beyond costs, terms, and technical ability. The answer should include why they believe their services are right for you. Wouldn't it be great if you could get the same contractors to build your building and maintain it for the next 25 years? With software, this is what you should try to achieve.

Nickels and Dimes

Before deciding on a services firm, it is important to for them to explain when you will incur extra costs. These costs go beyond the existing support contract. For example, if you need help setting up workflows, will the firm volunteer the solution or recommend a training course? Is creating a report considered a programming task? If so, how does the firm estimate the cost? What are their base rates? These are important questions because the costs for such things quickly add up. Services that typically require extra charges include training, customizations, upgrades and reinstalls (as a result of IT upgrading your server). Some firms offer little flexibility when applying additional charges. In terms of your budget, it may feel like the nickels and dimes are adding up. These issues rarely appear in a formal support agreement. Still, you should not have to pay for "training" when you only need a 30-minute refresher or a small change to a report.

Bigger is Not Better

Partnering with a professional service firm is crucial to your success. In many ways, the selection of your support vendor is more important than the choice of the software itself. Many software packages enable the successful management of your vertical and linear assets. But a good service firm should allow you to be better at what you do. A services firm should act as ongoing consultants. They should help you through organizational changes, resizes, retro fits, and re-stacks. Over the years, you should be able to count on them for major renovation projects and other challenges. These might include disasters, corporate shakeups, staff losses, and unexpected events.

For these reasons, a large services firm may not be your best option. They are likely to support multiple software packages thus decreasing their focus on the one you own.

Importantly, the team that implements the software will not likely be the one that supports you down the road. Smaller firms tend to provide more personalized support because the staff plays a role in your implementation. Another way to evaluate your support vendor is to ask whether they support your team or just the software.

Weathering the challenges means the support firm must establish a working relationship with your organization. The success of your business depends on it.

Changing Service Providers

For those unhappy with their current support service provider, my advice is to let your provider know. It is possible that they have no idea you are unsatisfied. If alerted to your dissatisfaction, they could take steps to correct the situation. Otherwise, remember that most support service contracts are annual. Costs may be incurred when switching providers in the short term. However, the ROI on your software investment and productivity will improve if you make the change sooner rather than later.

Conclusion

We hope this guide will help you through the confusing process of software selection for your facilities. Focusing on selecting the right consultants in the beginning should relieve much of the headache. Initially, you may need to talk to many different firms to find the right fit. It might seem a little like dating at first. But once you hit it off with the right provider you will have a better chance of living happily ever after. ☺

Tim Robinson & the Team at OnLINE FM