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Rental software-keep it simple



When you speak to many rental companies or most small non-IT companies for that matter about the software they use to run their businesses, there is a tendency for eyes to glaze over. This is completely different to a conversation you might have on the latest equipment they have bought, or on how the business is going. It is not always the case of course, some companies are run by accountants who know how good accounting software improves company performance in terms of generating business information and in simplifying and speeding up the routine book keeping duties.

When it comes to rental system software the reactions are more mixed, with even some of the most hands-on equipment lovers really appreciating the benefits that good rental software can bring.

Much of this is down to the highly competitive market among rental software providers - particularly in the UK - where it appears to have spawned a good number of companies that serve small to medium sized businesses around the world. Companies such as Higher Concept - recently acquired by US-based Point of Rental - with its Syrinx system, or inspHire, Jarma and MCS to name some of the principle players.

What is it and who should use it?

It would appear that rental software is beneficial for everyone from a one-man band right through to large conglomerates with tens of thousands of machines. For most software companies, their biggest customer is the construction sector but there are also significant numbers of access, audio visual, oil and gas, lighting, events and crane rental users as well. As can be seen in one of the top tips (number 4 - Don't fall into the bespoke trap) most crane and access rental companies will be able to use the off-the-shelf software reducing the cost of any expensive customisations. inspHire

for example has three off-the-shelf products - Express, Office and Corporate - which are scalable as the business grows from a single depot with one or two people accessing the system, through multi depot operations and up to 100 company users to a package that works across numerous countries and has up to more than 1,000 system log-on points.



Rental software can allow companies to be more efficient, increase utilisation and improve customer service by being able to keep track of every aspect of the rental item as well doing the core hire functions, producing key documents from quotes, delivery notes and contracts to damage notification and invoicing. Integrated Customer Relationship Management (CRM) modules also allows the company to track prospects, calls and meetings to updating sales forecasts both in the office and in the field.

Tail wagging the dog

One problem that all too often arises, especially with large corporate systems, is that employees end up serving the software/system, rather than the system serving the company and its employees. Or you end up with a system that requires too much training and it is not universally used, with staff keeping data on their own systems. For example at the Vertikal Press we

use a programme that was clearly designed for major multinationals with IT departments. When it was implemented 18 or so years ago, it was one of the few programmes that was multi-lingual, multi-currency and could handle VAT and other tax issues across Europe - essential for a company with operations in more than one country. However with no IT department and not even a dedicated IT person, it has been a struggle as it is not intuitive and all changes need specialist programming. While it has improved a little over the years it still seems cumbersome. However the thought of changing to a new system while doing our day jobs is the stuff of nightmares.

Easy software switching

The world is littered with companies and organisations that have suffered after switching to a new system with cost overruns and severe disruption not unusual. However these days that appears to be limited to the larger customised systems. All the software suppliers we have mentioned so far claim that their systems are simple and easy to install and are intuitive to anyone who regularly uses a PC. One of the benefits of these systems is that they tend to leave the accounting to





the accounting software specialists, such as Sage, QuickBooks and Xero which are well proven and familiar to a large number of employees. The rental software simply integrates with the standard off-the-shelf accounting package. This also allows the rental software suppliers to focus on streamlining rental operations and adding features that will delight rental company customers.

The fact that most rental software links to the accounting system has made switching between suppliers a practical option however not something you want to do if you can help it. This facility has enabled a highly competitive market to emerge which has spurred



rapid development and innovation, as the main suppliers try and keep one step ahead of the competition. But equally important is the support available in terms of assistance when a problem is encountered, a small addition is required or simply for employee training to ensure that the company gets the most out of the system it has purchased.

While the driving force behind the rapid adoption of rental software has been the ability to manage thousands of individual assets and improve efficiency and provide management information, regulation is increasingly playing a role. Systems now allow real-time addition of inspection sheets, hand over documents and acknowledgement of hand-over familiarisation instruction etc... It can also keep track of employee training, highlighting when any certification might need renewing.

Some of the most recent progress has been made interfacing with vehicle tracking systems allowing the end customer to see where his machine is with real time updates of estimated arrival times on site. For the company it can also see where its mechanics or salesmen are, should an urgent request come in. So far only a few companies are using the power of the

latest systems to the maximum, but the benefits for those who do are substantial and allow a small company to keep up or out manoeuvre industry giants with their mega-expensive integrated systems, which can be slow to update and rarely suit all areas of the company. It would appear that the latest stock systems have the users in mind and have not been structured to suit just the accounting and senior management team.

According to Jordan Thompson, hire software manager at Jaama, it is critical that rental companies utilise technology to maximise and grow their business potential, starting with a complete audit trail that clearly identifies all legislative compliance requirements are up to date, the exact location of all equipment in terms of who the customer is and a full history of all assets to maximise stock utilisation. "Without that information businesses will become inefficient and potentially lose money because they will not be maximising opportunities," she says. "What's more, companies could be investing in equipment that is rarely out of the yard rather than purchasing additional machines that are in demand."

But where is it all going?

Latest developments are concentrating on the addition of



machine telematics and a move from a Windows to a Cloud based system, allowing people to move away from the old server systems. Off the shelf systems for crane rental companies can also be tricky and may need a little more customisation so that they include lift plan drawings and other relevant documents. Companies that want to fully include workshop costs - including the cost of every nut and bolt used - also may need software customisation however the company must be fully committed to going down this path as this level of information and therefore systems required is a big step-up from the regular rental software.



10 tips for selecting rental software

1. Ensure software is future-proof

The rental industry is continually evolving and so should rental software. A software provider must be able to deliver a sophisticated, modern, online system and be fully focused on continuous product development and functionality improvements.

2. Develop a partnership

Acquiring a rental management software system is not like buying a tin of beans off a supermarket shelf. You should feel comfortable and able to form a long-term business partnership with a chosen supplier to maximise operating efficiencies and support.

3. Customer testimonials

Do not buy a software system in the hope that it might do the job. Contact existing users of the system that you are considering, talk to them about the benefits and if possible visit their offices to see the system operating in a real-world environment.

4. Don't fall into the bespoke trap

Select a standard software system that can accommodate upgrades and new functionality from your chosen provider. If special requirements

must be met, your software provider should be able to develop suitable modules to be added to the system relatively quickly and without charging a 'king's ransom'. Bespoke system restricts future developments.

5. Future business requirements

Try to anticipate the long-term requirements of your software system and do not simply focus on today's asset allocations. Just as technology evolves so do organisations, thus selecting the 'right' rental management system capable of reflecting future strategic change is critical.

6. Key objectives before 'bells and whistles'

Establish the business objectives that you want to achieve with your chosen hire management system. Too often decision-makers are wowed by the 'bells and whistles' offered by the technology without consideration as to whether key objectives are met.

7. Keep an open-mind

In establishing your immediate business objectives keep an open mind as to how additional modules in the system - and future developments - may further improve hire operations and administration.

A good example is operator and cost centre management.

8. Management information access

Entering data into a hire management software system is one thing, but accessing it easily, effectively and efficiently is a different matter. Therefore, ensure that a system has a good report writer that enables data to be swiftly obtained for analysis and comprehensive report compilation, without being an IT specialist.

9. Provider experience

Investigate the reputation and experience of your chosen software supplier. Analyse its existing customer portfolio and talk to existing system users, read case studies and press comments and check if the company has gained any independent recognition.

10. Supplier viability

Select a software partner that is fully focused on rental management system development, supply and aftersales support and is not a 'bit part' provider. Additionally, investigate the long-term viability of your preferred partner.

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Hoogwerkservice case study

Dutch rental company Hoogwerkservice is a family-owned business offering a range of cranes and aerial work platforms largely serving the construction sector from two locations in Hardinxveld-Giessendam near Dordrecht and Buren between Utrecht and Arnhem. It took the decision to replace its dated rental management system as it was unable to produce accurate, reliable stock levels and because the software company was not keeping pace with other suppliers to the rental industry.

After reviewing the market it chose the MCS-rm rental management software, believing it to be the most future-proof solution, coded in the latest Microsoft technology and SQL database. It also liked the fact that MCS has more than 30 years experience in the rental industry and seemed to have a flexible approach to problem solving.

Better understanding of return on investment

With its new system the company can now see up to date and accurate information on each asset - which not only includes cranes, telehandlers and aerial work platforms, but also alloy scaffold towers and glass handling attachments - as well as being able to share current machine availability with the hire desk.

"We now have complete visibility of our entire rental and sales inventory. We can track each machine throughout its lifecycle and know where it has been, what revenue it

has earned and how much it has cost us, all at the touch of a button. Knowing this information helps us to choose more wisely in which machines to invest."

Hoogwerkservice also sells equipment and offers third party service and maintenance as well as looking after its own machines. It now works with the MCS-rm workshop feature allowing it to monitor all costs associated with customer machine repairs, as well as ensuring that it keeps its rental equipment fully maintained with all relevant inspections and tests carried out.

Customer service improvements

Hoogwerkservice also says it has seen significant improvements in its internal sales process which has enabled it to provide improved customer service. Its MCS-rm rental software includes a CRM solution which links into its accounting system AFAS, for a full visibility of client status and history.



The six person sales team can access customer or prospect information on their mobile devices using CRM Mobile wherever they are, helping them improve productivity, provide a better service and be less office dependent, with all the relevant information at their fingertips. At the same time all hire and sales quotations are followed up automatically. As each quote is created, an 'action' can be scheduled as a reminder for anyone in the business to do something. This was previously a hit or miss affair, as it relied on a combination of individuals using an old CRM solution and manually creating Outlook call reminders separately. "The system has allowed our sales people to be far more organised and timely in making their follow-up calls for a quotation. We can see just how many quotes have been converted

into contracts and which ones are outstanding."

Mobile devices are also being used in the warehouse with electronic pick lists. "When we send a machine out to a customer, the warehouse picker can occasionally get the serial number wrong so the wrong machine goes out. MCS Picking Mobile is making a big difference to the accuracy and improving reliability and efficiency."

In summary

The company says that as a result of its new software it has become more 'agile' and that the most significant benefits include being able to control and monitor its entire inventory of rental assets as well as machine sales, better understand its customers' needs with a consolidated view of all customer interactions, order history and financial data.

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