Tip Sheet:
Making the Most of Technology

Technology can provide significant help in collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using data. The right technology can store the information that you collect from the numerous data sources that are available to your Head Start program; can roll up or aggregate your data at a variety of levels—classroom, center, program, agency—so that you can have a clear overview of your program; can dissect the data in various ways to aid your analysis; and can transform your data into reports to share with everyone who needs to see and understand what is happening in your program.

Remember, though, that technology is only a tool. Using a data management system to record and streamline your organization's information can only work when the organization's staff regularly use and understand how this system helps them in their day-to-day work.[1]

How to Use Technology

Begin by assessing your data needs. Every program's technology needs differ because of such factors as size, geographical distribution, the kind of available hardware, Internet access, and staffing. Some programs may be able to house almost their entire recordkeeping and reporting system in an electronic data management system that tracks all aspects of services to children and families. Others may need to use a combination of electronic and paper-and-pencil data-recording methods to meet their needs. Consider what you want a data management system to be able to do for you. Are there things you are tracking by hand now that you could track more efficiently with a data management system? Would a new approach save time for your staff or add time?

Understand the capacity, strengths, and limitations of your current data management system. If you are considering purchasing a new system or upgrading your current system, ask yourself the following questions before you go shopping:
- What data management system do we currently have?
- What are its capabilities?
- How well is it meeting our data needs?
- What would we like our data management system to do that it doesn't currently do?
- Are we using our current system to its fullest capacity?

Talk to the developer of your system to learn as much about it as you can. Learn how to customize the system to create the reports you need. Many developers will work with you to adapt their data management systems so that it does exactly what you need it to do.

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[1] Robertson, J. (2005, November). 10 principles of effective information management. Retrieved from
http://www.steptwo.com.au/papers/kmc_effectiveim/index.html

Consider the pros and cons of purchasing a system vs. developing an in-house data management system. The most frequently used commercial systems, such as Child Plus or PROMIS, enable you to collect the kinds of data you need to operate a Head Start program: health data, family demographic data, and Program Information Report (PIR) data. Although some Head Start grantees prefer the flexibility of a homegrown data management system that can adapt quickly as needs are identified.

Plan and budget for maintenance and upgrades. Take into consideration what your budget allows in the immediate future, but also plan for how your needs and use will expand each year. And don't forget to include tech support in your budget. Your organization may have the internal capacity to provide such support, or you may opt to contract with an outside organization. According to *Knowledge Management and Technology Planning for Head Start Programs* (available on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center: ECLKC), "a good rule of thumb is that only 30% of your technology spending should go to hardware and software and a full 70% should go to training and support."[i]

Make data management part of everyone's job, and provide training and ongoing coaching on the use of your data management systems. While some staff members adapt to technology easily, others may need more support to feel comfortable with the technology. Most data management and child assessment systems provide training. Maximize the training that is available through these developers. Leverage your tech savvy staff to support and enhance other staff members' ability to learn the system.

The more staff members are comfortable with your data management system, the more likely it is that you will have consistent and reliable data that can help to move your program from compliance to excellence.

Decide who will perform data entry tasks and who will monitor them.
Head Start and Early Head Start programs are of two minds when it comes to data entry. Some programs, especially larger ones, prefer to have centralized data entry. They hire data entry staff whose sole responsibility is to enter data. These programs feel that centralizing this function enables them to have better quality control of their data. Other programs prefer to have health, family service staff, and/or teachers enter the data directly. In their opinion, data entry is performed more effectively by those who know what the data means. Whether done by data entry specialists or direct services staff, records and reports need to be consistently updated and reviewed for completeness and accuracy.

Find out if you are eligible for E-Rate. E-rate is a program housed under the Schools and Libraries division of the Universal Services Administrative Company (USAC). The program provides discounts on certain telecommunications; Internet access; and certain kinds of equipment, products, and services for eligible schools and libraries. The program is state specific, so you have to find out whether Head Start programs are eligible in your state. (Early Head Start and home-based programs are not eligible.)

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[i] Knowledge Management and Technology Planning for Head Start Programs. (July 11–15, 2004). Head Start and Early Head Start Director's Institute, Crystal City, VA. DHHS/ACF/HSB. Retrieved from https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/communications/KnowledgeManagem.htm

Additional Resources

"Knowledge Management and Technology Planning for Head Start Programs"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/communications/KnowledgeManagem.htm

"What's Involved in Technology Planning?"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/planning/WhatsInvolvedi.htm

"Technology Plan Reference Guide"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/planning/TechnologyPlanR.htm

"Technology Organizational Assessment Worksheet"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/planning/TechnologyOrgani.htm

"Why a Technology Plan?"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/planning/WhyaTechnology.htm

"How Technology is Funded: The Basics"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/planning/HowTechnologyis.htm

"Office of Head Start E-Rate Technology Plan"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/fiscal-mang/erate-toolkit/OfficeofHeadSt.htm

"Getting Help with Your Technology Plan"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/planning/GettingHelpwith.htm

"Accounting Software Assessment Worksheet"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/planning/AccountingSoftwa.htm

"Working with Corporate Volunteers and Consultants"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mang-sys/planning/WorkingwithCorp.htm

"What is Quality Data for Programs Serving Infants and Toddlers?"
http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/docs/what-is-quality-data-infants-toddlers.pdf