



# MAKING WISE DECISIONS

---

A Step-by-Step Guide to  
Picking the Right Data System

**Toolkit** | [makingwisedecisions.shcowell.org](http://makingwisedecisions.shcowell.org)

**S.H. COWELL  
FOUNDATION**

[public  
profit]

**B3**  
Consults

with additional  
support from:



*Making Wise Decisions: A Step-by-Step Guide to Picking the Right Data System*  
written by Betsy Baum Block, Corey Newhouse, and Justine Wolitzer and published  
by the S.H. Cowell Foundation.

Copyright ©2018 by S.H. Cowell Foundation.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted  
in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic  
or mechanical methods, for commercial purposes without the prior written permission  
of the publisher.

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce this publication, in part or in whole,  
for noncommercial purposes so long as text and images are not altered and the authors are  
expressly credited.

A digital version of this publication is available at [makingwisedecisions.shcowell.org](http://makingwisedecisions.shcowell.org).

**S.H. Cowell Foundation**

595 Market Street, Suite 950  
San Francisco, CA 94105  
(415) 397-0285  
[shcowell.org](http://shcowell.org)

Printed in the United States of America

## INTRODUCTION

<b>Welcome to Making Wise Decisions</b> .....	5
---	---

## INTENTION

<b>Understand Why You Need a New Solution</b> .....	10
Why We Need a New Solution – Template 1 .....	15
<b>Define Your Reporting Needs</b> .....	19
Reporting Needs Inventory – Template 2 .....	23

## READINESS

<b>Name the Project Team</b> .....	25
Name the Project Team – Template 3 .....	30
<b>Create a Program Model</b> .....	31
Basic Program Model – Template 4 .....	35
<b>Document Your Workflows</b> .....	36
Workflows and System Users – Template 5 .....	39
<b>Map Your Data</b> .....	41
Data Catalog and Data Mapping – Template 6 .....	46
<b>Create Your Budget and Timeline</b> .....	48
Timeline – Template 7 .....	52
Budget – Template 8 .....	53

## SELECTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

<b>Find Likely Vendors</b> .....	55
Software RFP – Template 9 .....	58
<b>Conduct Interviews and Reference Checks</b> .....	63
Interview Form – Template 10 .....	67
Reference Check Form – Template 11 .....	69
<b>Launch the New System</b> .....	70
Training and Support Planner – Template 12 .....	74

## CONCLUSION

<b>Go Live and Keep Going</b> .....	76
Acknowledgments .....	79



# INTRODUCTION

---

# Welcome to Making Wise Decisions

---

Thanks so much for utilizing *Making Wise Decisions: A Step-by-Step Guide to Picking the Right Data System*. We're thrilled that you want a data system that works for your organization!

## Who is Making Wise Decisions for?

*Making Wise Decisions* was developed for small to mid-sized mission-driven organizations that want to better manage information about the services they provide. In other words, if your annual budget is \$5 million or smaller, and you need to collect information about the people you serve, this toolkit is for you!

We created this toolkit to help organizations navigate the tricky process of figuring out what kind of information and reports they need, what sort of system will best meet those needs, and how to implement the new data tools well. This toolkit will support organizations just considering adopting a formal data system, and those with longstanding data collection and use practices in place.

Regardless of your organizational budget, if you want to find a better data system, this toolkit can help.

## How do I use Making Wise Decisions?

*Making Wise Decisions* is an intuitive, easy-to-use guide. Each step is a separate chapter in the guide, with background on why that step matters, suggested tasks, a template to help you and your team, and additional resources.



### Time for this activity

*Anticipated time to complete*



### Why are you doing this?

*Clear statement of "why"*



### Keep in mind

*Guiding language on how to approach the work*



### Suggested Steps

*Step-by-step instructions to move ahead*



### Other Resources *Resources to help you deepen your understanding*

Begin by completing the organizational quiz ([makingwisecisions.shcowell.org](https://makingwisecisions.shcowell.org)), which points to the types of data systems most likely to meet your organization's needs, and offers a suggested starting point in the guide.

Or, flip through the guide and find the step that best aligns with where your organization is right now. You can always circle back to an earlier chapter.

## How long will this take?

An estimate of the hours required to complete the suggested steps is at the start of each chapter. Each takes three to twenty hours to complete. Depending on your organization’s capacity and the urgency of finding a data system, working through all of the steps will take six to twelve months.

You may have the staff to handle this internally, but you can also consider hiring an external consultant to manage the process. If you do, make sure that the consultant focuses on navigating the process and that all critical decisions come from within the organization. The budget section helps you consider the cost of an external consultant for the overall process.

## Why does the process take so long? (or understanding the key phases of finding a data system)

Implementing a new data system requires a lot of thought, which we group into three phases. Careful planning ensures that you do it right the first time—we know you’ve heard the stories of the organizations that took shortcuts and faced costly overruns and unanticipated delays.

INTENTION	READINESS	SELECTION AND IMPLEMENTATION
<p><i>Understand the reasons for moving to a new system and critical indicators of success.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Understand Why You Need a New Solution</li> <li>» Define Your Reporting Needs</li> </ul>	<p><i>Document your detailed needs for a great system.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Name the Project Team</li> <li>» Create a Program Model</li> <li>» Document Your Workflows</li> <li>» Map Your Data</li> <li>» Create Your Budget and Timeline</li> </ul>	<p><i>Pick the vendor; launch and succeed postlaunch.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Find Likely Vendors</li> <li>» Conduct Interviews and Reference Checks</li> <li>» Launch the New System</li> </ul>

Keep in mind that the action doesn't end once the system is launched. Successful data system implementations require ongoing efforts to maintain healthy systems.

## I want to know more!

Check out the acknowledgments section at the end of this guide for a description of who was involved in creating *Making Wise Decisions*.

Want to access more resources or contact the creators? Visit the *Making Wise Decisions* page on the S.H. Cowell Foundation website at [makingwisedecisions.shcowell.org](https://makingwisedecisions.shcowell.org).







# INTENTION

---

# Understand Why You Need a New Solution

---



## Time for this activity

**1–2** hours for a team meeting to articulate the key problem statement and critical indicators for success

**4–12** hours to document scenarios (depends on complexity/size) of the needs

**2–3** hours to clean up documentation and review with team

---



## Why are you doing this?

Though this seems very basic, many organizations forget to articulate WHY they are pursuing a new data system—whether that question is being asked by the organization or it comes from a staff member trying to make the case to more senior leadership, or even if the organization is making the case to a funder to justify the project and its expense.

With scarce resources at stake, being focused on why you want to make a change will help get you on the right road.

*If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there.*





## Keep in mind

Articulating your “why” should be an intentional process, similar to strategic planning, so your organization will have to allocate resources accordingly. Making a major change to your data infrastructure (and potentially operations) will be most successful when you clearly document the change you expect to see. Make sure you get past the symptoms and think about root causes. A common method is the “5 Whys”—ask “why?” five times.

When your organization locks on to the goal and reasoning behind it, you create a North Star to help guide the team through tough spots, such as navigating through long lists of possible data systems or tackling previously unanticipated tasks associated with data migration.



## Suggested Steps



### 1 Articulate the key problem statement behind your need to change.

Below are some common reasons to consider.

- » The current data system limits our business process because we can’t customize it. (Customization)
- » We don’t have the staff capacity to handle administering our current data system. (Resources)
- » Our program model has become more complex, and we’ve outgrown the constraints of our current software. (Functionality)

**PRO TIP**

**Revisit your “why” at several critical stages during your process.**

*As you learn, your priorities may shift and/or your understanding of the organization’s need may expand.*

“ You have to have more strategic planning to understand why you might need to move away from Excel, and not just reach for the sexy new object. ”

—Tamara Alvarado,  
School of Arts and Culture

- » Our needs have changed as we’ve become more data driven, and we want more robust reporting options. (Reporting)
- » The current interface is clunky, or we need something more mobile ready. (Functionality)
- » We can no longer afford the current solution. (Cost)
- » We entered into work that introduces us to new privacy requirements or another new programming that looks unlike our existing work. (Mandate/Functionality)

**2 Determine conditions of success.**

List three or four goals that are measurable and as objective as possible for defining a successful transition to a new system. Focus on answering key questions like the following.

- » What will be different about the quality of services you offer?
- » Will you decrease the staff time dedicated to data management?
- » Will you increase your ability to communicate with funders and stakeholders?

**PRO TIP**

**A new system isn't always the answer... or sometimes one isn't enough.**

*You might need to think “out of the box” and consider using multiple systems—or maybe even a reporting tool.*

---

### 3 Review and document your system needs.

Consider the following questions and document the reasoning for each.

- » Do you need a cloud-based service? Or do you want to have something physically installed on machines?
- » What are the confidentiality standards that need to be met?
- » What is the technical capacity of the users, and what does the new software need to address? How many users will you have?
- » What does your current software allow you to do that you need to keep? And what does it not allow you to do?
- » What are your ongoing expectations for a vendor relationship?
- » Do you need this software to interface with other software packages?
- » How many programs will the new data system support?
- » What timing/budget constraints do you have? How could implementation be phased?



## Other Resources

### Salesforce Getting Ready Playbook, Sam Dorman Consulting

*Though Salesforce focused, this playbook includes lots of thoughts applicable to all organizations around what to consider before selecting a system.*

<http://samdorman.com/gettingreadyplaybook/>

### National Council on Nonprofits Strategic Planning Resources

*Writing a “why” can sometimes include elements of a strategic planning process.*

<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/strategic-planning-nonprofits>

### The 5 Whys Method of Root Cause Analysis

*A “keep it simple” way to think of the underlying causes and need for change.*

[https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC\\_5W.htm](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_5W.htm)

### Why and How to Conduct a SWOT Analysis

*Developed by Kansas University as part of its community toolbox.*

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/swot-analysis/main>

## 4 Consider organizational readiness.

Conduct a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) exercise to more clearly understand how your organization will handle the upcoming changes. Taking a deep look at these categories helps capture information about the state of your organization in a way that ensures the project plan can address where you are. Included in the resources at left is guidance on how to execute this, and what a SWOT analysis looks like.

## 5 List scenarios that will demonstrate success of a new system.

The scenario should incorporate the following.

- » A high-level information flow, including staff and client interactions
- » Forms used and data elements captured during those interactions
- » Expected outcome—for example, an onscreen dashboard or printable report

“ When people are intimidated by tech, they tend to think they can buy it and be done. That’s not how it works. ”

—Karen Weisbrodt,  
Edna McConnell Clark Foundation / PropelNext





# Why We Need a New Solution

» Adjust this template as needed, but ensure it focuses on the critical guiding questions listed in step 1.

## Reasons for Seeking a New System

List one to three reasons that drive your need for the new system. Conduct a root cause analysis or similar fact-finding to ensure you focus on the root causes and not higher-level symptoms.

Reason 1 ▶

Reason 2 ▶

Reason 3 ▶






Visit [makingwisecisions.shcowell.org/templates](https://makingwisecisions.shcowell.org/templates) to access this template on Google Drive™



## Conditions for Success

The following measurable and objective goals will be evidence that we have reached success. List as many conditions as necessary, but try to keep this to five or fewer goals. Prioritize into high-medium-low.

 High Priority	 Medium Priority	 Low Priority

## System Needs

Using the questions from step 3 on page 13, begin to list your system needs, also known as “system requirements.” This could include cloud-based HIPAA-compliant, web-based vendor-supported training, etc. Group by theme if the list exceeds 15 items.

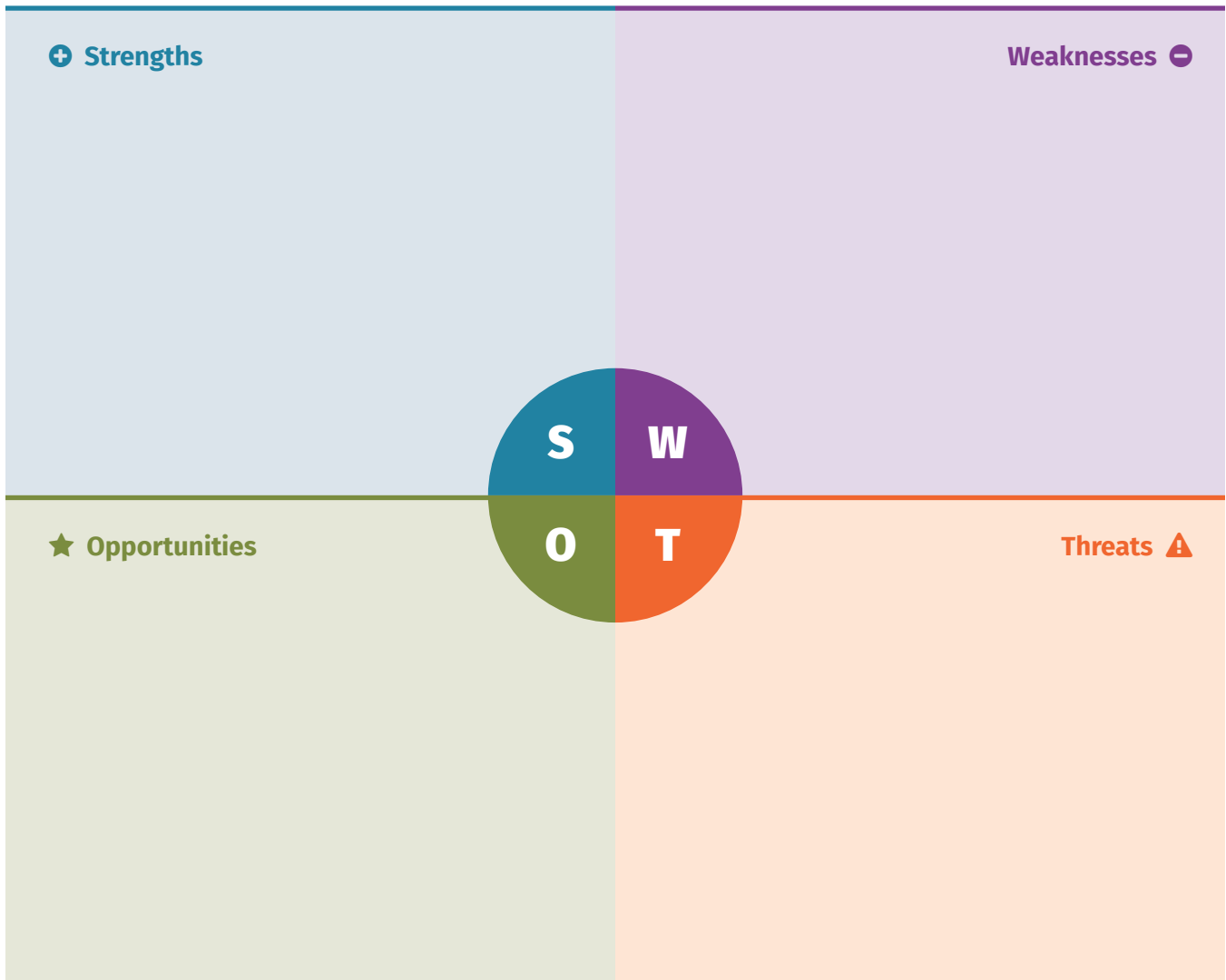
Theme	Requirements





## Organizational Readiness

Include a SWOT or similar analysis of organizational readiness, with tasks on addressing weaknesses and threats, and those capitalizing on strengths and opportunities.





## Key Scenarios

The following business scenarios are the top five to seven scenarios that demonstrate our unique needs for a system. This is the heart of the document, and each scenario should be very detailed.

**EXAMPLE** **Scenario 1:** Intake existing client into new program.

» *The following scenario is critical because it shows that program staff can review all the services to date, and the system inherits all the historical information but also allows program staff to update the record as needed, when enrolling in a new program.*

What happens with people:	What gets put in a system or retrieved from the system:
<p><b>Existing client meets with program staff and indicates new need.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program staff opens client record.</li> <li>• Program staff retrieves dashboard that shows current demographics, contact information, prior year of activity with organization, and assessment results. <i>[If known, list all fields you need to see.]</i></li> <li>• Program staff opens enrollment form for new program. <i>[If known, list exact inputs/input types.]</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Program staff asks about new need and begins to enroll client in program. Client is determined eligible.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program staff is prompted to ask for updated contact information.</li> <li>• Enrollment form asks for program-specific information, including assessment for program eligibility.</li> <li>• Upon form completion, program confirms client eligibility.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Program staff informs client of next activity and updates other staff.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• System automatically enrolls client in next activity, which shows on client dashboard.</li> <li>• System generates notification to other staff who work with client regarding new enrollment.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Program staff sets follow-up to contact client in two weeks.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program staff sets reminder on client record to contact client in two weeks.</li> </ul>

# Define Your Reporting Needs

---



## Time for this activity

**2–4** hours to take inventory of existing reports

**3–4** hours to make mock-ups of the reports on your wish list

**2–3** hours to share report inventory and collect feedback

**1–3** hours to make revisions to the inventory and mock-ups

---



## Why are you doing this?

Start with the end in mind. A good data system does not just hold data—it reports data in a way that is useful for your organization. Organizations that are clear on their reporting needs at the beginning are more likely to find a data system that works for them. Define these reporting needs clearly so you can use them as criteria when evaluating vendors from day one.

---



## Keep in mind

### Remember that “reporting” is answering questions.

The term “reporting” can feel like a boring topic, or even a scary one. But reporting is so much more than that!

Think about, and talk about, reporting as the way you answer mission-critical questions about your work.

### **Every report needs an audience.**

Reports that meet the needs of specific audiences ensure good use of resources and create higher value. You will likely need different reports for internal purposes (program planning, internal tracking, etc.) and external purposes (marketing to funders or providing community updates).

### **Different reports have different frequencies.**

Think about the reports you will need at different time frames. What questions do you need to be able to answer on a daily basis? Weekly? Monthly? Quarterly? Annually?



## **Suggested Steps**

### **1 Take inventory of the reports your organization currently uses.**

Use the thoughts above around audience and frequency as starting points if needed, and list the reports on which your organization currently relies. Add the reports to the **Reporting Needs Inventory** template and attach a sample of each report. If any of the reports are inadequate, note the desired changes on the sample.

---

## 2 Add your report wish list to the inventory.

Step outside your current reality and dream of the reports you wish you had: What are the questions you wish you could answer? What would that report look like?

*Make sure you incorporate reports from your **Key Scenarios** and/or **Conditions for Success** listed in the Why section.*

---

## 3 Create a mock-up of each wish list report.

You can draw this by hand or create it in MS Word or Excel. Simple mock-ups are great! The important thing is that you think through conceptually what you want the end result to look like.

---

## 4 Share the inventory for feedback.

Identify all of the audiences that rely on reports from your data system. Make sure all have a chance to provide input on what should be in the **Reporting Needs Inventory**.

Audiences are likely to include your leadership team, program staff, development staff, communications/marketing staff, board of directors, and funders.



## Other Resources

### **Start Where You Are: Using Program Data to Learn, Manage, and Report**

*Blog post with suggestions for determining reporting needs.*

*By Eleanor A. Smith and Deb Stephenson.*

<http://www.eleanorasmith.com/start-where-you-are-using-program-data-to-learn-manage-report/>

### **Designing with Mock-ups and Storyboards**

*Examples of design mock-ups and suggested tools. By Traci Gardner.*

<http://3844f15.tracigardner.com/class-posts/designing-with-mockups-and-storyboards/>

### **PowerPoint—My Dashboard and Report Design Tool**

*Tips on using PowerPoint to create report mock-ups. By Steve Hughes.*

<https://dataonwheels.wordpress.com/2013/03/20/powerpointmy-dashboard-and-report-design-tool/>

## 5 Revise (and repeat if needed).

Revise the **Reporting Needs Inventory** and mock-ups based on the input from your team. Run the final versions by the end user(s) of each report to see if further revisions are needed.

“ We're not just collecting this information for no reason. We're really using it, we're doing something with it, and we will continue to look back and reflect and move forward. ”

—Andrea Broxton,  
Partnership for Children and Youth



# Reporting Needs Inventory

» Include the reports your organization currently relies on and the reports you wish you had.  
 » Attach samples of the existing reports and mock-ups of the wish list reports.

**Report Name:**

**Purpose:**

Does this report currently exist?	What data elements need to be in this report?	How often does this report need to be run?	Who is the audience for this report?
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, and it is just right. <i>(Attach existing report.)</i>	<div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div>		



# READINESS

---



# Name the Project Team

---



## Time for this activity

**1–2** hours to select critical team members

**3–6** hours to discuss and adjust job descriptions

**2–3** hours for a kick-off meeting

Ongoing time for regular project team meetings

---



## Why are you doing this?

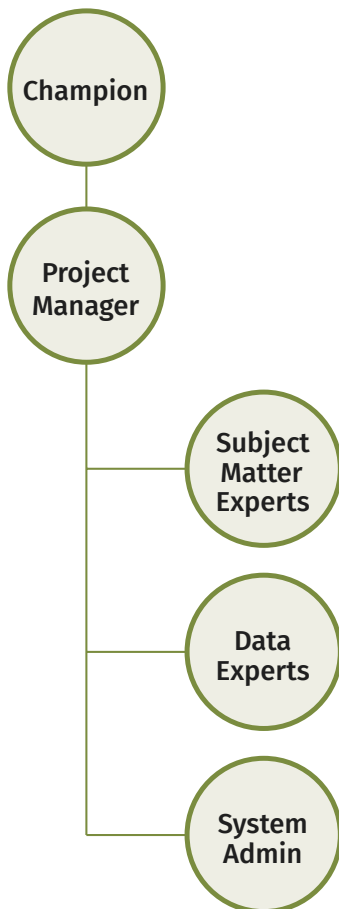
Putting the right team together is crucial for success.

Organizations that rely on the software vendor to handle everything or that load the entire project on a single person tell tales of painful, unsuccessful implementations. Having the right team in place will ensure the following.

- » The resulting software supports multiple departments' needs.
- » Sufficient resources/capacity are in place to manage a project from start (documenting organizational readiness) to finish (implementation and adoption) and beyond.



## Key roles



### PRO TIP

**You want varied perspectives, but balance that against having too many cooks in the kitchen.**

The team can be as small as two people (project champion and project manager should be two different people), as long as all the roles described below are assigned.

### Project Manager

The project manager (PM) will manage the entire life cycle of the project. While not necessarily a technical role, the PM takes day-to-day responsibility for the ins and outs of a data system implementation and is a primary job responsibility.

- » Manage the selection process
- » Manage budget and timeline
- » Clearly communicate the “functional requirements” (aka what the software will do)
- » Have (or build) strong collaborative relationships with internal staff and the software vendor

In some instances, organizations may hire a contractor to be the project manager. In this case, it is critical that the PM has strong connections to the organization’s staff and ensures key decisions are understood and owned by the organization.

### Champion/Sponsor/Decision Maker

The champion is an organization leader and part of the organization’s executive team. This role is responsible for supporting the project manager’s decisions and marshaling organizational support for those decisions. The champion has authority over the budget for the project.

**PRO TIP**

**Don't just layer working on the implementation onto someone's current job.**

*Adjust or create a job description that addresses this role, so that other responsibilities are adjusted accordingly.*

## Subject Matter Experts

SMEs are people who will voice how programs work. The SMEs can articulate the needs of the program and also consider potential impacts of technical decisions on how programs operate. While one person can act as an SME for multiple programs, every program should have an SME on the team.

## Data Experts

The data experts are the people who know where all the data lives at an organization and the business rules behind how data is stored.

## System Administrator or IT Expert

The system administrator or IT expert will keep the system running once the vendor has completed the scope of work. For “custom ready” models, the system administrator often handles ongoing system configuration needs. In addition, the system administrator will also support the actual rollout and anticipate any impacts to the organization's existing hardware and software (for instance, replacing unsupported browsers).



## Suggested Steps

### 1 Identify the champion and project manager.

As discussed on the previous pages, having a dedicated project manager is the crucial first step. Don't neglect to make sure that the project has a champion who will advocate for the project at the organizational leadership level.

---

### 2 Do a reality check on the total full-time equivalent (FTE) staff that can be dedicated to the project.

Selecting a new data system requires focused effort and energy; job descriptions and expectations should reflect that.

---

### 3 Clearly identify all staff to be engaged in the process.

Once the timeline has been roughed out, make sure that all phases are supported and the key people to fill each role are identified. This can be done collaboratively or can be assigned by the champion.



## Other Resources

### Idealist Job Descriptions

Scan job descriptions to see what is needed and the time allocation given to this role. Using “evaluation” as a key word will bring up research directors and data analysts.

<http://www.idealists.org/>

## 4 Adjust the project team’s workload.

Be realistic about the anticipated time to support the project and ensure that managers adjust the workload for each team member.

## 5 Kick it off right.

Include the entire project team in a kickoff and clearly describe each member’s roles and time commitment. Ensure that the kickoff lays out all the critical activity in the project and also builds some team spirit to ensure great collaboration.

“ I wish we would have looked more at organizational capacity, and how to on-board the system with new staff. We didn't really understand the amount of effort it would take to get everything set up. Instead of shifting responsibilities around, or bringing in someone new, [the project] was added on top of people's loads, and we realized later the need to increase capacity. ”

—Jenny Ocon,  
UpValley Family Centers



# Name the Project Team

- » The \* roles are what you need, at a minimum, to succeed in this project. All other activities can be rolled up into the project manager.
- » Adapt FTE and specifics as needed for your organization and process. Those included are offered as suggestions.
- » If your project timeline is long and/or complex, you may get more detailed on the different project phases when you are working on detailed project plans, but this will be sufficient for identifying your team.

Role	Who	FTE	Phase 1 Role (Intention)	Phase 2 Role (Readiness)	Phase 3 Role (Selection/Implementation)
<b>*Project Manager</b>		0.75	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Keep team on task.</li> <li>» Prepare critical documentation.</li> <li>» Work with vendor.</li> <li>» Prepare budget.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Prepare project timeline.</li> <li>» Ensure job descriptions for team are complete.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Handle ongoing project management.</li> </ul>
<b>*Champion/ Sponsor/ Decision Maker</b>		0.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Get approval for project at executive level.</li> <li>» Create buy-in for assigning roles.</li> <li>» Secure budget.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Ensure resources/ staff are officially allocated and assigned.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Make critical decisions.</li> <li>» Support adjustments to budget/timeline.</li> <li>» Communicate to executive team.</li> </ul>
<b>Data Expert(s)</b>		0.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Identify key needs and constraints.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Identify where the data lives and document migration needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Prepare files for migration.</li> </ul>
<b>System Administrator/ IT Expert</b>		0.25		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Support data mapping.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Train on configuration/ support implementation.</li> </ul>
<b>Subject Matter Expert(s)</b>		0.25 per program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Articulate the need and anticipated change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Identify business requirements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Support testing.</li> </ul>



Visit [makingwisecisions.shcowell.org/templates](https://makingwisecisions.shcowell.org/templates) to access this template on Google Drive™



# Create a Program Model

---



## Time for this activity

**1–2** hours to form a program model team

**2–3** hours to decide on approach to program model process

**3–6** hours to draft program model

**1–2** hours to refine the program model based on feedback

---



## Why are you doing this?

Articulating your organization’s program model(s) will serve as a “GPS” of your data collection efforts and ensure that you collect information that is useful and efficient—maybe even fun!

A program model is the big-picture view of how a program is designed to work. It identifies the program’s expected short-term and long-term goals and links these goals to program activities.

By explicitly documenting the activities and goals at the heart of your program, you can better narrow in on which data elements are meaningful to track and which are a waste of your valuable time.



## Keep in mind

### **Program models articulate what programs are designed to do.**

You may have heard terms like “Theory of Change,” “Theory of Action,” “Program Theory,” or a “Logic Model.” While these concepts have subtle distinctions and varying levels of detail, they are all program models. For the sake of this toolkit, feel free to gravitate toward whichever concept feels most appropriate for your organization.

At the heart of the program model is the articulation of a few questions that lead to wiser data collection.

- » What is the change the program intends to achieve?
- » How do program activities lead to this change?
- » What evidence do we collect to know the program is working?

### **Be comprehensive (enough).**

Most likely you will want to develop a separate program model for each of your organization’s programs. In some cases, particularly if your programs have a lot of overlap, you might want to make one overarching model for the whole organization, or spend time articulating what makes one program distinct from another.

### **Be meaningful.**

There are plenty of great resources to help you develop a program model. Go as deep as feels meaningful to your organization. At minimum, we suggest using our template to sketch out a simple program model.





## Suggested Steps

### PRO TIP

#### Don't reinvent the wheel.

*Your organization might already have developed the program models you need. Ask around! If that is the case, we recommend you walk through the steps to the right to see if the model needs any updates.*

### 1 Confirm your program model team.

Your program model will be stronger if it incorporates different perspectives and opinions. We recommend including the program director, a few program staff, and any staff members responsible for evaluation. Consider including a few participants who have benefited from your work.

---

### 2 Decide on your program model approach.

Review the program model resources for inspiration. Feel free to pick one resource and follow its steps, or combine different ideas from multiple resources.

---

### 3 Work through the process as a group.

Once you decide on the right approach to develop a program model, get input from everyone on your program model team. Identify a facilitator and a note taker to help keep your group focused and moving ahead.

---

### 4 Break the sessions up over time.

You will need at least two sessions, if not more, to develop the program model. Divide the process into as many sessions as your team needs.



## Other Resources

### W.K. Kellogg Foundation Logic Model Development Guide

*Practical and clear guidance on how to create a logic model. By W.K. Kellogg Foundation.*

<https://www.wkkf.org/resource-directory/resource/2006/02/wk-kellogg-foundation-logic-model-development-guide>

### Developing Your Theory of Action: A Facilitation Guide

*A facilitation guide organizations can use to lead their own Theory of Action process. Includes suggested steps, activities, and worksheets. By Catherine Borgman-Arboleda and Julie Poncelet.*

[http://actionevaluation.org/wp-content/uploads/Theory-of-Action-Facilitation-Guide\\_2012\\_opt.pdf](http://actionevaluation.org/wp-content/uploads/Theory-of-Action-Facilitation-Guide_2012_opt.pdf)

### How to Build a Theory of Change

*A simple step-by-step process with examples. By NCVO Charities Evaluation Services.*

<https://knowhownonprofit.org/how-to/how-to-build-a-theory-of-change>

### Develop Programme Theory

*Collection of resources including links to different activities and processes to develop a program model as well as different ways to present your program model. By BetterEvaluation.*

[http://www.betterevaluation.org/plan/define/develop\\_logic\\_model](http://www.betterevaluation.org/plan/define/develop_logic_model)

## 5 Bring the model back to the full organization.

After your team has drafted the model, share it with your larger organization for a reality check. Meet again as a team to see if the model should be revised based on this input.

“ We're still innovating all the time, but because the strategic plan is so clear, we are able to innovate and change without freaking people out. Our core needs are very clearly defined. ”

—Russell Gong,  
Aim High





# Basic Program Model

- » To build your basic program model, add your program's components by answering the guiding questions in the diagram below.
- » When completing the diagram, try to connect your answers with your program's ultimate goal.

Overall Program Goal/Vision	Your Response
How will the world/community be different because of the work of your program?	

Program Component	Guiding Questions	Your Responses
"Program participants..."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What are the relevant shared characteristics of your program participants (e.g., age, gender, race)?</li> <li>» Where are the program participants from?</li> </ul>	
...who participate in _____ ... (program name)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What services are you providing program participants?</li> <li>» How often do program participants access the services provided?</li> </ul>	
...reap direct benefits in the short term...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What new skills do participants exhibit?</li> <li>» What unexpected improvements do participants demonstrate?</li> <li>» What access to new resources do participants have?</li> </ul>	
...and can continue to enjoy longer-term benefits."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What are long-term skills that participants gain?</li> <li>» What aspects of participants' lives are improved because of the skills they gained in your program?</li> </ul>	



Visit [makingwisedecisions.shcowell.org/templates](https://makingwisedecisions.shcowell.org/templates) to access this template on Google Drive™

# Document Your Workflows

---



## Time for this activity

**1** hour to identify your list of users

**2-3** hours to define user data tasks and workflow needs

**1-2** hours to get feedback and make revisions

---



## Why are you doing this?

We're sorry to say that your new data system will not magically input data and create fantastic reports.

Organizations that design their system with clearly defined processes are more likely to seamlessly integrate this data system into their existing workflow.

Workflow processes are the specific activities or tasks your team members complete to help your organization achieve its mission. By getting clear on your organization's processes now, you can search for a data system that is compatible with your workflow, rather than having to adjust your workflow to a system that is not a good fit.



## Suggested Steps

### PRO TIP

**Having articulated workflows not only smooths implementation.**

*It also allows you to clearly see which vendors can support your high-priority workflows and those who can't.*

### 1 Identify your data system users.

Identify the roles who will be interacting with your system. Some individuals will use it daily, some only occasionally. Make sure they are all on your list! Likely roles include case managers, project leads, evaluation leads, and organizational leaders.

---

### 2 Define users' data tasks and data system needs.

Go through the roles and list the tasks each completes to input and/or output data. Depending on the complexity of your organization, you can keep these tasks high level or you can create detailed step-by-step workflows. Alongside the tasks, list the corresponding data system needs. (Use our template!)

---

### 3 Consider the client perspective.

As a check to make sure you are not forgetting any data tasks, consider the workflow process from clients' point of view. What data do they provide at their first visit? What about their future visits? How do they know the organization remembers them? What information do they need to provide to receive services? How are these services tracked? How does the organization know if clients are making progress?



## Other Resources

### Membership Management and Your Workflow Process

*Blog post with tips on nonprofit workflow processes. By Carlyne Braid.*

<https://blog.capterra.com/membership-management-and-your-work-flow-process/>

### What is a Swimlane Diagram?

*For those who want to create detailed workflow diagrams. By Lucidchart.*

<https://www.lucidchart.com/pages/swimlane-diagram>

## 4 Streamline processes as you go.

As you are documenting these steps, look for processes that are outdated or processes that could be improved.

No need to keep doing a practice just because that is what you did in the past!

## 5 Get feedback.

All system users should review your template and provide feedback. Multiple perspectives will ensure nothing important falls through the cracks.

“ [The old process required] eight different clicks and all these different boxes and it wasn’t really intuitive in how you got there from one place to another. Staff identified they wanted the new system to facilitate the workflow and be more user-friendly. ”

—Teresa Crimmens,  
Family Resource Center of Truckee



# Workflows and System Users

- » Identify who will use your system and how it needs to adapt to their workflows.
- » Create a separate table for each of your key workflows. We recommend selecting five to seven of your most common workflows and two to four unusual, but important workflows. Example workflows might include enrolling clients, tracking participation information, recording case management interactions, or entering assessment data.
- » Update the roles, tasks, and needs to reflect the specifics of your organization. One person may have multiple roles.
- » See the example on the following page for inspiration!

**Workflow:**

System User	Data input or output?	What are the workflow tasks?	What implications does this have for your data system needs?
	Input		
	Output		
	Input		
	Output		
	Input		
	Output		
	Input		
	Output		



**EXAMPLE**

**Workflow:** Case management interactions

System User	Data input or output?	What are the workflow tasks?	What implications does this have for your data system needs?
Data Entry Support	<b>Input</b>	Enters attendance forms, completed surveys, and other paper-to-data system tasks.	Mass entry of same fields for multiple clients. Needs efficient way to import data rather than entering one record at a time.
	<b>Output</b>	None.	N/A
Case Manager	<b>Input</b>	Enters client records in the data system in real time while meeting with client.	Entry needs to be quick and easy so it does not slow down client meeting.
	<b>Output</b>	Uses information to monitor individual clients' progress.	Needs to see a quick at-a-glance view of each client's progress without having to dig through record.
Project Lead	<b>Input</b>	Occasionally updates client records when filling in for a case manager.	Entry needs to be intuitive since project lead will not be doing it often.
	<b>Output</b>	Tracks progress toward project-level goals.	Needs an efficient way to output monthly progress toward goals.
Evaluation Lead	<b>Input</b>	None.	N/A
	<b>Output</b>	Uses data for evaluation and reporting at the project and organization level.	Needs system to track and output high-level goals.
Organizational Leader	<b>Input</b>	None.	N/A
	<b>Output</b>	Uses reports to stay up-to-date on organizational performance and to share status with supporters and funders.	Needs to pull high-level progress updates quickly so can respond to funders promptly.
Database Administrator	<b>Input</b>	None.	N/A
		Uses quality assurance reports to ensure data is trustworthy.	Needs comprehensive quality assurance reports that can spot red flags.





# Map Your Data

---



## Time for this activity

**3–4** hours to create a data system catalog

**2–4** hours to build the visual map

**4–6** hours for data governance (optional)

*If you have a data governance policy, you may already have sufficient documentation for this part of the process.*

---



## Why are you doing this?

Most organizations have data that lives in a variety of places—we estimate that more than 70 percent of organizations keep client data in three or more places. Add in different donor management platforms, financial reporting, and other needs your organization has, and it is easy to imagine that you can overlook a key source of data during the planning stages, and this can have costly impacts down the line.

### PRO TIP

#### No shame.

*Every organization has spreadsheets that live on one person's cloud or hard drive.*

Additionally, you will undoubtedly have to make some trade-offs when you are finalizing what will go into your new client tracking system, and the systematic analysis of your data will help you think methodically about good data to keep and bad data to lose.



## Keep in mind

### You can't take it all with you.

You are unlikely to need quick access to a record from the 1990s, and bringing forward the extra weight can be costly. Only take the data you need with you to the new system, and look into archiving old data.

### Not all paper is bad.

You may have an instinct to try to go completely paperless in one fell swoop, but sometimes you can put too much data into your new system. Be thoughtful about what data you really need in the system (and track it!). Use your **Program Models** as a guide.



## Suggested Steps

### 1 Catalog your systems.

List all the client tracking/evaluation systems you can remember, and under each system describe its purpose and all the data elements it tracks. Include both qualitative and quantitative data—anything you currently capture about your clients and their activities. (*Generally, we don't mean this to include your finance and donor management systems—unless they also happen to hold client data that needs to live in your new system.*)

“ We took a huge step forward to really simplify what we’re tracking. It got extremely detailed and before we knew it we had a lot of garbage in the system, which would result in confusing results. We got clearer and simpler about what we wanted to track and report on. ”

—Alissa Abdo,  
On the Move

## 2 Good, Bad, or Excessive Data?

Don’t bloat your new system with data that doesn’t serve a purpose. You want to keep good data, which is usable, reliable, and needed.<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, flag data elements or sources that won’t support the organization going forward. The following list includes bad types of data that can lead to incorrect reporting.

- » Duplicative data—bad data management has led to things like multiple email addresses for one client
- » Miscalculated or misaligned information—especially where failure to agree on a calculation leads to totals that disagree
- » Orphaned records—this is a technical “parent/child” record challenge that happens when something gets deleted in the database the wrong way
- » Jibberish—a common error of requiring fields where users don’t care or don’t get good data and put in things like “dksafj;”

Be honest with yourself in reviewing data about what you’ll keep and what is bloat. Use this as an important guide to what you will import into the new system—if bad data can be fixed and is important, now is an important time to note that.

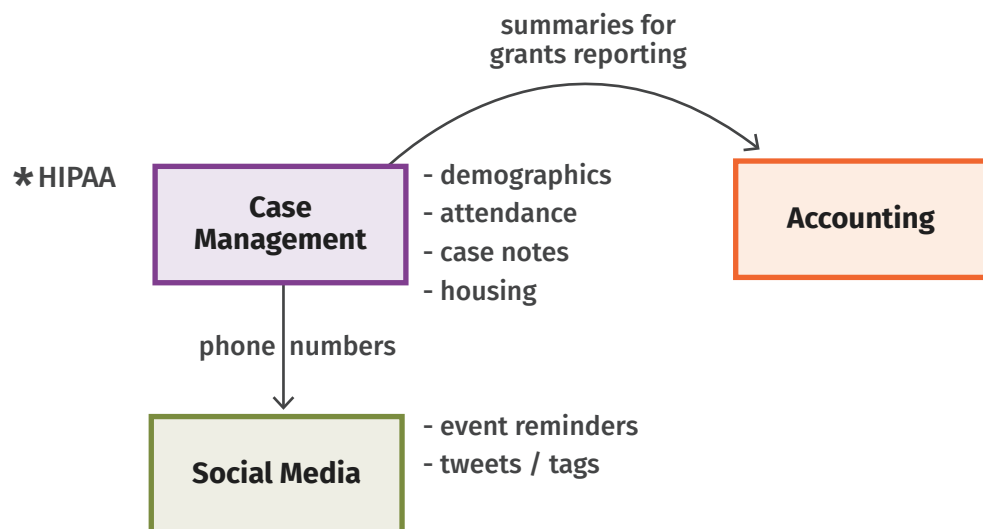
<sup>1</sup>Thanks to our colleagues who presented on “How to Lose 20 Pounds of Bad Data” at the 2017 Nonprofit Technology Conference.

### 3 Look for connections between systems.

Build an understanding of the major connections between data sources, even if that connection is something done manually today (like summaries for grant reporting).

### 4 Build a flow map to show connections and dependencies.

This is where you start to draw, as simply as possible. Start with sticky notes and string if needed, or even a big dry erase board. Begin small (like the drawing below) and build out from there. Your goal is to generate conversation and search for hidden assumptions about how systems talk to each other—either mechanically or through an actual system interface.





## Other Resources

### How to Overcome Your Database Demons

*Comprehensive list of tasks to maintain a data system. By Robert Weiner.*

<http://www.techsoup.org/support/articles-and-how-tos/how-to-overcome-your-database-demons>

### Understanding Nonprofit Data Governance

*Don't let this effort go to waste—institute data governance policies.*

<https://www.slideshare.net/CathyFolkesCFRE/understanding-nonprofit-data-governance>

### Consider the NTEN Tech Assessment

*The Nonprofit Technology Network has great tools for understanding where you are in technology and how you can grow.*

<https://www.nten.org/accelerate/>

### Mind Mapping

*If you want pretty visuals, Canva can get you there—as can a host of other mind-mapping tools.*

<https://www.canva.com/graphs/mind-maps/>

## 5 Review with staff.

Look for obvious gaps, and create an amnesty zone where staff can offer up their hidden spreadsheets.

## 6 Consider building a data governance policy (optional).

Now that you have all this information together, you might take time to set some policies in place that will help keep your good data good and will prevent you from winding up with a bunch of bad data.

“It's easy to want to collect a lot of data, but is anyone going to have time to enter and manage it all? What is your end goal, what is the purpose of a data system to the organization?”

—Russell Gong,  
Aim High



# Data Catalog

» To create a data catalog, use this basic template or something similar. A data quality flag can serve as a reminder to reconsider this field for migration.

System Name	System Purpose	Key Data Elements	Data Quality Flag	Migrate?

## EXAMPLE

System Name	System Purpose	Key Data Elements	Data Quality Flag	Migrate?
Client Tracking	Record case notes, demographics	First Name		Y
		Middle Name	X	Y
		Last Name		Y
		Social Security Number		Y
		Home Address		
		Email Address		Y
		[...]		
Event Tracking	Event attendance	Date of Event		Y
		Event Identifier		Y
		First Name		Y
		Last Name		Y
		Attended		Y



Visit [makingwisechoices.shcowell.org/templates](https://makingwisechoices.shcowell.org/templates) to access this template on Google Drive™

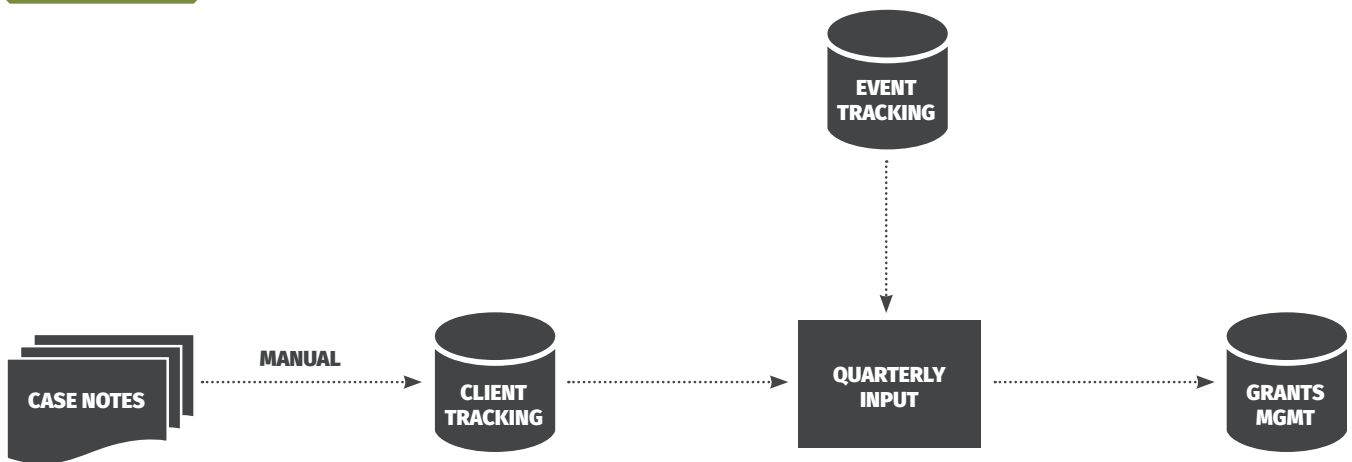




# Data Mapping

» This template uses some standard flowcharting symbols, but you can just as easily take a picture of a dry-erase board or a sticky wall.

## EXAMPLE



# Create Your Budget and Timeline

---



## Time for this activity

**2–4** hours to create a budget

**2–4** hours to create a timeline

**3–6** hours for revisions and approvals



## Why are you doing this?

Many organizations struggle with implementation because their planning neglected the “readiness” side of database implementation, or they failed to budget for critical activities. Planning for the entire scope of the project ensures adequate resources and well-managed expectations—and increases the likelihood of a successful implementation.





# 1 Start with the project plan.

## Suggested Steps

Look at your plan in phases, and use this toolkit to help layer in critical activities. Add all the meetings, approval processes, and checkpoints.

INTENTION	READINESS	SELECTION AND IMPLEMENTATION
<p><i>Understand the reasons for moving to a new system and critical indicators of success.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Understand Why You Need a New Solution</li> <li>» Define Your Reporting Needs</li> </ul>	<p><i>Document your detailed needs for a great system.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Name the Project Team</li> <li>» Create a Program Model</li> <li>» Document Your Workflows</li> <li>» Map Your Data</li> <li>» Create Your Budget and Timeline</li> </ul>	<p><i>Pick the vendor; launch and succeed postlaunch.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Find Likely Vendors</li> <li>» Conduct Interviews and Reference Checks</li> <li>» Launch the New System</li> </ul>

**PRO TIP**

**“Plan the work, work the plan.”**

*A plan is only as good as your commitment to keep to it!*

We also suggest adding some postlaunch activities (see **Go-Live and Keep Going**), to make sure you harness the best of change management.

Use a Gantt chart, which allows you to see overlaps in activities and to define dependencies between activities (see step 3). You can also use a spreadsheet or an online project management tool.

---

## 2 Add names to the plan.

Inserting names is a crucial reality check on being overcommitted or underresourced.

---

## 3 Review for durations and dependencies.

We often look at project plans only with the due dates in mind. Consider how long tasks will take and what needs to be completed before another task starts.

---

## 4 Draft the budget.

If you are starting with an amount in mind, you'll need to distribute that across the key phases. A conservative estimate is to allocate 50 percent of the budget to implementation, 30 percent to readiness, and 20 percent to postlaunch (adoption) activities in the first year. The following are costs you should consider, at a minimum.

- » Estimated staff and consulting
- » Vendor (including customization/configuration)
- » Data cleaning and migration (if applicable)
- » Training
- » Hardware or software upgrades

If you plan to use consultants, be prepared for rates around \$150 per hour.



## Other Resources

### Managing Change from Knowhow Nonprofit

*Be intentional about how you manage change.*

<https://knowhownonprofit.org/people/change>

### Tools Used by Tech Soup to Manage Projects

*Make sure you've "tooled up" to manage the project effectively, and also consider what types of tools help manage the timeline.*

<http://www.techsoup.org/support/articles-and-how-tos/six-views-of-project-management-software>

## 5 Review and get approval from the executive team.

Ensure that the timeline is clearly understood *and supported* by your leadership.

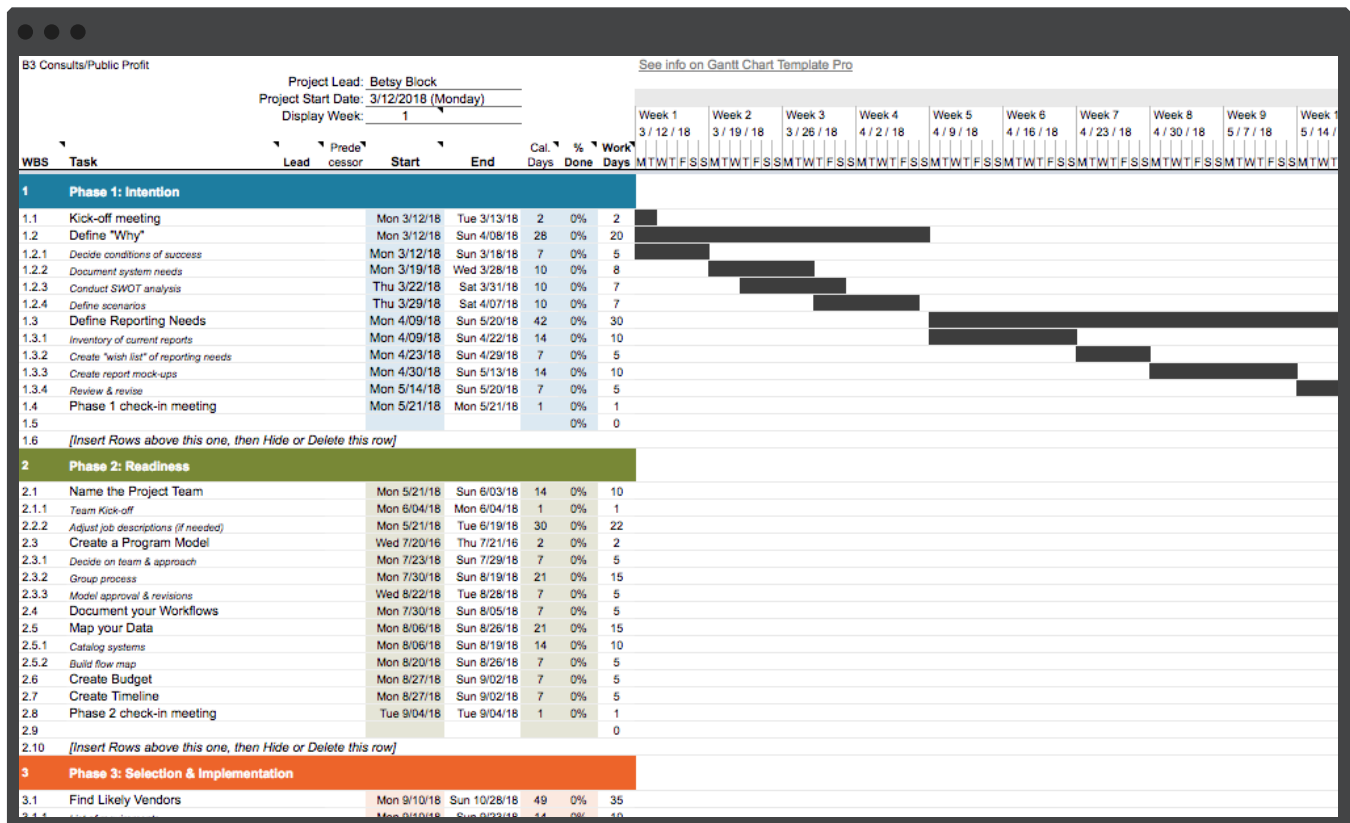
“ My recommendation in terms of process: make sure you have the infrastructure to support that process. You can have the greatest process you've even seen, but if you don't have the backend infrastructure to support it, it is going to fall apart. Not because the process stunk, but because you didn't have the structure. ”

—Andrea Broxton,  
Partnership for Children and Youth



# Timeline

- » Use the planner below to make sure that you identify and plan for all the critical tasks in your project.
- » Use a Gantt format, like this one based on Vertex 42's Gantt Chart Template: <https://www.vertex42.com/ExcelTemplates/excel-gantt-chart.html>



Visit [makingwisechoices.shcowell.org/templates](http://makingwisechoices.shcowell.org/templates) to access this template on Google Drive™



# Budget

- » Input all planned costs in this budget worksheet, including internal staff time. If you need to work backward from a fixed budget, consider allocating one-time costs as follows: **30 percent to readiness, 50 percent to implementation, 20 percent to postlaunch (adoption).**
- » Most of your ongoing costs will be captured in the adoption phase, with the exception of training, which will be more cost-intensive at project launch.

Phase	Who	What	One Time	Annual/ Ongoing
Readiness	Nonvendor	Internal staff time	\$ .00	
		Strategic consultant	\$ .00	
		Hardware upgrades	\$ .00	
	Vendor	Needs analysis (“discovery”) and design (includes workflow analysis)	\$ .00	
Selection and Implementation	Nonvendor	Internal staff time	\$ .00	
		Hardware upgrades	\$ .00	
		Third-party software (e.g., reporting)	\$ .00	
	Vendor	Development and/or customization/configuration	\$ .00	
		Data cleaning/migration (may be a third-party vendor)	\$ .00	
		License purchase (note if renewal is required)	\$ .00	
Postlaunch (Adoption)	Nonvendor	Internal staff time		\$ .00
		Third-party software (e.g., reporting, SMS messaging)		\$ .00
	Vendor	User support	\$ .00	
		Training	\$ .00	\$ .00
		Ongoing support/help desk		\$ .00
		Annual license fee		\$ .00
		<b>Total to nonvendor</b>	<b>\$ .00</b>	<b>\$ .00</b>
		<b>Total to vendor</b>	<b>\$ .00</b>	<b>\$ .00</b>
		<b>Internal staff time</b>	<b>\$ .00</b>	<b>\$ .00</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>\$ .00</b>	<b>\$ .00</b>

Visit [makingwisedecisions.shcowell.org/templates](https://makingwisedecisions.shcowell.org/templates) to access this template on Google Drive™



# SELECTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

---

# Find Likely Vendors

---



## Time for this activity

**1** hour to finalize your list of requirements

**1-3** hours to research possible systems

**4-5** hours to write and refine a request for proposal (RFP)

**2-3** hours to review and score vendor responses

---



## Why are you doing this?

Your team has done a lot of great work to get clear about why you need a data system and what you need it to do.

Now it is time to scan the field for software vendors that are likely to be a fit.

The preparation you have done makes you a dream client—clear about why you want a system, clear about what the system will do, and clear about who will use it.



## Suggested Steps

### PRO TIP

**Ask around and do Internet research to find three or four possible vendors.**

*Ask for a phone screen if you aren't sure the vendor can meet your needs.*

*Plan to interview two or three vendors.*

### 1 Finalize your list of requirements.

Prior exercises have helped to clarify what functions you seek, what reports you need, and who will use the system. They are central to your request for an RFP.

---

### 2 Ask around.

Tap your professional networks to learn about the data systems that peer organizations are using. Check Idealware and the Nonprofit Technology Network (NTEN) for resources.

---

### 3 Click around.

Visit vendors' websites. Do the features they offer align with your highest priorities? Many have video walk-throughs.

If you haven't yet, complete the *Making Wise Decisions* online quiz. It will recommend types of data systems based on your needs.

---

### 4 Prepare an RFP.

Summarize your organization's mission, need for a data system, sought-after features, implementation plan, and budget for prospective vendors. (Use our template!)

---





## Other Resources

### techsoup RFP Library

*Curated set of resources on the RFP process and sample software RFPs.*

<http://www.techsoup.org/support/articles-and-how-tos/rfp-library>

### There Ain't No Such Thing As a Free Software Package

*Words to the wise from Laura Quinn.*

<http://www.idealware.org/there-aint-no-such-thing-as-free-software/>

## 5 Review responses.

Confirm that potential vendors meet your essential requirements, are within your budget, and have a coherent project plan. Invite your top candidates to interview.

“ Vendors can have a separate lead focus on selling the product, so be ready to start over a bit getting to know the team who will support implementation and ongoing support. ”

—Hillary Beyer,  
McKinleyville Family Resource Center



# Software RFP

» Use this template to prepare a request for proposal for software vendors. If this template has sections that your organization isn't ready to answer, consider incorporating those unanswered questions as a desired service from potential vendors.

## Overview

After completing the following sections, summarize the results into this high-level overview.

- » [Organization name] seeks a new data system in order to...
  - » Key features of the new system include...
  - » Ideally, the project will begin...
  - » Our budget is [\$X] for the design and launch of the system, and [\$Y] for annual maintenance and upkeep.
- 

## Organizational mission, vision, and structure

Use your organization's strategic plan, organizational chart, and prior evaluation reports to complete this section of the RFP.

- » [Organization name] seeks a new data system in order to...
- » Our mission is to... We envision a future in which...
- » Our services include...
- » [Organization] employs [X] people and engages [Y] volunteers annually.



Visit [makingwisecisions.shcowell.org/templates](https://makingwisecisions.shcowell.org/templates) to access this template on Google Drive™





## Goal for the new system

Use the results of the **Why We Need a New Solution, Reporting Needs Inventory,** and **Workflows and System Users** activities to complete this section.

- » We want a new data system to enable us to...
  - » When fully implemented, our organization will...
  - » Currently, our data systems include...
  - » Our staff's capacity to use technology is...
- 

## System requirements

Use the results of the **Reporting Needs Inventory, Data Mapping,** and **Workflows and System Users** activities to complete this section.

- » We seek a new data system that is [based in the cloud] [hosted on our servers].
- » A variety of data will be input into the system, including...
- » Data [will] [will not] need to be archived. [Explain further as needed.]
- » We seek a variety of reports, including...
- » Our reporting needs change [often] [sometimes] [rarely]. We will need [frequent] [occasional] [rare] updates to the reporting tools as a result.
- » We [do] [do not] need a custom report builder from this data system.
- » We [do] [do not] need the ability to export data from the system. [Explain further as needed.]
- » We [do] [do not] need the ability to import data into the system. [Explain further as needed.]



- » Different members of our team will use the system.
    - » [Describe them] team members will input data directly into the system, drawing from [name sources]. They will use [name devices] and will enter data from [one] [multiple] locations. Data entry will take place [monthly] [weekly] [daily] [in real time].
    - » [Describe them] team members will use the reports in the data system to [describe uses].
    - » [Describe any other user groups and uses here.]
  - » [Include if applicable] Due to the nature of our work, we need a data system that is [HIPPA] [FERPA] compliant.
- 

## Development and testing

Use the results of the **Reporting Needs Inventory, Data Mapping, and Workflows and System Users** activities to complete this section.

- » [X] members of our team will work closely with the vendor during the discovery phase, including [describe their roles]. We have a number of documents to orient the vendor to our needs, including... [describe them here].
- » We [will] [will not] need to migrate prior data into the new system. [Describe further as needed, including whether the vendor will be responsible for data cleaning and import.]
- » During the system testing phase, we anticipate that [X] team members will participate, including [describe key roles]. [Describe preferred roles for testing, including who schedules, hosts, and documents the results of the testing phase.]



## Implementation and launch

Use the results of the **Training and Support Planner** activity to complete this section.

- » At this time, we plan to implement the new data system [in a phased process] [at one time]. [Describe as needed.]
  - » Based on our assessment of staff members' training needs, we would like to incorporate the following kinds of training opportunities for our team [select as appropriate].
    - » In-person workshops for [X] people [describe number of desired sessions]
    - » Self-paced online trainings
    - » Online webinars hosted by the vendor [describe number of webinars, if known]
    - » One-on-one training hosted by the vendor [describe number of team members]
  - » Once the system is live, we anticipate that our team will need ongoing support via [phone/video] [on-site support] [online self-help resources].
- 

## Timeline and budget

Use the results of the **Name the Project Team, Budget, and Timeline** activities to complete this section.

- » Our project team consists of [X] staff members; there will be [Y] primary points of contact for the software vendor.
- » We would like this engagement to start [date] and end by [date], if possible. [Any other deadlines or timing considerations here.]
- » Our budget is [\$X] for the design and launch of the system, and [\$Y] for annual maintenance and upkeep. We [are] [are not] able to pursue additional funding for this project.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Remember, many foundations are open to making capacity-building grants to support data systems, especially among their current grantees.



---

## To respond to this RFP

Submit a proposal to [name] at [email] by [deadline].

- » In [15] pages or fewer provide the following.
  - » Your firm's background, including experience with similar clients
  - » Key features of your software and how it aligns with our needs
  - » Anticipated challenges and/or questions to address during the project
  - » Proposed project plan, including discovery, testing, and implementation
  - » Proposed budget, including billable rates for staff and direct costs

# Conduct Interviews and Reference Checks

---



## Time for this activity

**1-2** hours to form a cross-functional selection team

**1-2** hours to prepare the interview protocol and prep for interviews

**1-2** hours per vendor interview

**1** hour for reference checks

**1-2** hours to discuss candidates and select a vendor

---



## Why are you doing this?

Now that you are clear about what your new data system needs to do and have found a few potential vendors, it's time for interviews and reference checks.

This is where your team can really test the fit between your organization's needs and each potential data system.



## Keep in mind

Organizations that have successfully conducted interviews and reference checks with data system vendors do a few things right.

### **Form a cross-functional interview team.**

Members of the project team, including the project manager, champion, data expert, and system administrator, should be on the interview team. In addition, invite representatives of the different staff roles that will use the new data system to join the interview team. Each member of the interview team can listen for the ways in which a vendor's data system will support both their department's work and the broader organization—and can identify potential challenges.

### **Require a demonstration.**

Ask your finalists to prepare a demonstration that shows how your users will complete tasks including data entry and reporting. Don't let them show you static screenshots or describe what they will do—have prospective vendors actually click through their system and show you. Ask to see specific features that are a high priority for your organization, especially if you aren't clear about whether the vendor offers them. Request to access a version of the software to poke around, too.

### **Understand the project life cycle.**

It's easy to get your head turned by a beautiful user interface or an especially engaging presenter. Make sure that potential vendors explain the full life cycle of the project, so that you



know what's included in their proposed price. The sample vendor interview questions cover a lot of this.

### Check references.

Since organizational needs vary, a reference will help you understand how the vendor approaches the process of working with clients, more so than the ins and outs of the product itself. References should be very enthusiastic supporters of the vendor. If not, beware. Ensure that the vendor offers you at least one reference that conducted a project similar to yours.



## Suggested Steps

### PRO TIP

**Create a rating form that identifies each of the key criteria the data system needs to meet. (Use your Software RFP as a starter!)**

*Have each member of the interview team record his or her ratings, then review as a group.*

### 1 Confirm your interview team.

Identify at least one representative of your key user groups and invite that person to participate.

### 2 Refine your selection criteria.

Start with the list of must-have features you identified in the RFP. Add other considerations, including start-up and ongoing cost, user training, and technical support. Consider creating a rating form.



## Other Resources

### Six Steps for Navigating the Vendor Demo

*Make the most of a software vendor demonstration, including how to get beyond the sales pitch. By Andrea Berry.*

<http://www.idealware.org/navigating-vendor-demo/>

### Ten Common Mistakes in Selecting Donor Databases

*Though aimed at organizations selecting a donor data system, this article has great advice for any software selection process.*

*By Robert L. Weiner.*

<http://www.idealware.org/common-donor-database-mistakes/>

### How to Avoid Getting Ripped Off by Ed-Tech Vendors

*For those who like their software selection advice with no sugar coating.*

*By Rob Waldron.*

<http://educationnext.org/how-to-avoid-getting-ripped-off-ed-tech-vendors-ten-tips/>

## 3 Rehearse the interview.

This is a new process for your team. Taking time to run through the interview questions and selection criteria will help everyone succeed.

## 4 Compare notes.

Once the interviews, demos, and reference checks are complete, convene the interview team to share their ratings and any concerns they may have.

## 5 Follow up.

You'll probably have some follow-up questions for the vendors and references after the interview team meets. Ask them!

“ I wish I had thought about asking for references earlier in the process just to have more time to digest. ”

—Teresa Crimmens,  
Family Resource Center of Truckee





# Interview Form

- » Update this list based on your organization's needs and preferences.
- » Pair the interview with a demonstration of the software and reference check. If you like, add a score or grade column to more handily compare the vendors after the interview.

**Vendor:**

Questions	Notes
<b>Focal market, ideal client</b>	
Describe your focal market. That is, what kinds of clients make up the majority of your portfolio?	
Describe your ideal client. What kinds of organizations have the most success with your software? What kinds of organizations have the least success?	
<b>Core features, limitations</b>	
What are the core features of your software? What does it do best?	
What features are part of the core modules/offering? What are add-ons or additional costs?	
What are its limitations? What do clients ask for you to change or improve?	
Do you integrate with other key software, such as [name those you use]? What does the integration look like?	

Visit [makingwisecisions.shcowell.org/templates](https://makingwisecisions.shcowell.org/templates) to access this template on Google Drive™



Questions	Notes
<b>Alignment with our needs</b>	
<p>In what ways does your software address our functional needs as you understand them?</p>	
<p>What gaps do you see between your software and our needs? [Ask follow-up questions specific to the functional needs you identified in the planning stage.]</p>	
<p>Can we take the software for a test drive before we make a decision?</p>	
<b>Project life cycle</b>	
<p>What goes into your standard contract? Will the features/services you mentioned today [name them] be included in our contract, for the price you quoted in your response?</p>	
<p>What will the discovery process look like? That is, how will you get to know our business processes, data, and reporting needs?</p>	
<p>Whom do you plan to include on the vendor project team? Whom do you need on our team?</p>	
<p>What will the design process look like? How involved will we be in this?</p>	
<p>What will staff training look like? Ongoing support? Describe the documentation available for your system.</p>	
<p>How long will this take? What might move us off that timeline?</p>	
<p>Additional Comments:</p>	





# Reference Check Form

» Update this list based on your organization's needs and preferences.

» Pair the interview with a demonstration of the software and reference check. If you like, add a score or grade column to more handily compare the vendors after the interview.

<b>Vendor:</b>	<b>Reference:</b>
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Please briefly describe your organization, including the services you offer and the size of your team.	
How do you use [name of vendor's software]?	
What drew you to select [vendor]?	
What is the best part of working with [vendor]? The worst?	
With the benefit of hindsight, what would you do differently when it comes to selecting and implementing a data system?	
Would you recommend [vendor] to a similar organization? Why or why not?	
Additional Comments:	

Visit [makingwisecisions.shcowell.org/templates](https://makingwisecisions.shcowell.org/templates) to access this template on Google Drive™

# Launch the New System

---



## Time for this activity

**1-2** hours to prepare a communications plan

**2-4** hours to prepare a training and support plan

Training and support time will vary

---



## Why are you doing this?

Thoughtful “go-live” planning will make sure that you migrate smoothly and that both the organization and the system are ready. Prepare your organization that the first 12–18 months is the make-or-break period for your new data system.

Your data system vendor won’t hold all the pieces of the implementation for you; create a range of ongoing internal supports for your team.





## Keep in mind

### It's a change management process.

Almost any kind of change is tough, and shifting data systems is especially challenging. Fortunately, there are terrific resources to help leaders plan for and support change. Remember that change doesn't just happen—it is something we plan for and keep thinking about over time.

### “Culture eats strategy for lunch.”

Management guru Peter Drucker is credited with this aphorism, and it's so true when it comes to launching a new data system. While your new system has great promise to improve your organization's performance and make your team's day-to-day functioning that much better, it's just a tool. If there's no data going into it, or that data isn't any good, your new data system won't reach its potential.

Step 5—creating a feedback loop—helps to ensure that the team sees the value of the new system right away.



## Suggested Steps

### 1 Create a communications plan.

Prepare a plan that clearly specifies who will communicate with the team about the major changes ahead and spells out specific topical points, including how to address common concerns. Assign communications roles and timelines. Remember that leaders must overcommunicate to make sure the message is heard.

**PRO TIP**

**The data system isn't a silver bullet. It's part of a bigger puzzle...**

*Organizations should be learning and growing, and their data systems should keep up.*

---

## **2 Identify staff training and support needs.**

If you didn't identify these resources in the project plan, now is the time to develop a training and support plan for each user group, taking into account the group's tech literacy, preferred learning environment, and likely use of the new system.

---

## **3 Name the implementation support maven.**

As the team begins using the new system, there are bound to be some bumps in the road. How will team members receive support as they build their skills? How will bugs and feature requests be recorded and prioritized? Name the go-to person for help with data system implementation.

---

## **4 Make sure the vendor plans for testing, conversion, and "go/no-go."**

When your vendor gives you the timeline, it should include some time for expert users to test the system before training the full staff, a plan to migrate data, and a specific set of criteria that have to be met before you move from an old system to a new. The most common forms of migration to a new system include an all-at-once cutover, parallel run, or phased by programs; your vendor should walk through the trade-offs of each.





## Other Resources

### Understanding Change Management

*Any of the articles from William Bridges Associates will help get you familiar with the reasons why and even some of the how.*

<https://wmbridges.com/featured/articles/>

### Hands-on Technology Training

*Two blog posts with tips on hands-on software training. By Karen Graham.*

<http://www.idealware.org/designing-technology-training/>

<http://www.idealware.org/logistics-for-hands-on-training/>

### Dabbling in the Data: Hands-on to Participatory Data Analysis

*Here are 15 interactive activities to help teams make meaning of data and have fun building a stronger data culture at your organization.*

<http://www.publicprofit.net/Dabbling-In-The-Data>

## 5 Create a feedback loop.

Demonstrate the value of the new system early and often to your team. Use existing reports in regular team meetings to reflect on performance, and dream up questions to answer using the data in the system. Do whatever will show the team, over and over, that the new system makes a meaningful difference. Find regular opportunities to use the reports from the new system; aim for at least once a month.

## 6 Record your learnings, then use them.

No plan survives its first brush with reality. Update your launch strategy based on lessons learned, including how to effectively train and support your staff on an ongoing basis. Are there substantial bug reports? Useful feature requests? Reengage with your data system vendor to discuss. The team will learn a lot as you go. Create a shared log to record insights on the training and implementation process to support continuous quality improvement.



# Training and Support Planner

- » The planner below is helpful for tailoring your training and support plan based on the needs of your user groups.
- » Update the user groups to reflect specific titles and roles in your organization, and consider including administrative functions, too.
- » Current tech literacy is a big-picture measure of the user group’s comfort and skill with data systems.
- » You may need to ask the team what they want from their preferred learning environment and ongoing support.

User Group	Current Tech Literacy	Data System Use	Preferred Learning Environment(s)	Ongoing Support
<b>Insert the appropriate choice in each row below.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Limited <input type="checkbox"/> Moderate <input type="checkbox"/> Above Average <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced	<input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally <input type="checkbox"/> Monthly <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly <input type="checkbox"/> Daily	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-paced webinar <input type="checkbox"/> Real-time webinar <input type="checkbox"/> In-person group training <input type="checkbox"/> In-person one-on-one training	<input type="checkbox"/> Phone/email w/vendor <input type="checkbox"/> System documentation <input type="checkbox"/> “Refresher” webinars <input type="checkbox"/> One-on-one technical support
Data Entry Support—entering attendance forms, completed surveys and other paper-to-database tasks.				
Case Manager—keeps client records in the data system, uses information to monitor individual clients’ progress.				
Project Lead—tracks progress toward project-level goals.				
Evaluation Lead—uses data for evaluation and reporting at the project and organization level.				
Development Director—uses data for grant reporting and grant applications.				
Organizational Leader—uses reports to stay up-to-date on organizational performance and to share status with supporters and funders.				

Visit [makingwisechoices.shcowell.org/templates](https://makingwisechoices.shcowell.org/templates) to access this template on Google Drive™



# CONCLUSION

---

# Go Live and Keep Going

---



## **Congrats**

### **Take a moment and celebrate.**

Congratulations! You've completed one of the most challenging projects any mission-driven organization can undertake. Your new data system will equip the team to more efficiently record and report information and, more importantly, to get better at what you do.

### **And now get back to work.**

We encourage you to reflect on how well the system is meeting the organization's evolving needs a few times a year. Making small adjustments to the system as you go will keep your investment working for you longer. Your organization will likely be due for a system refresh in about three years. Keeping a running list of what's working about your current data system, and what can be improved, will prepare you for another success when it is time to revisit your data system.



## Next Steps

### 1 Create a cross-functional user group.

Keep a conversation going about the needs and priorities for the system. This could be the same group that helps promote the data culture within the organization, but at the very least should do the following.

- » Conduct periodic system audits to make sure the data is healthy.
  - » Prioritize need changes or enhancements to the system.
  - » Act as “super users” to help onboard new staff, particularly if vendor-provided training is minimal.
- 

### 2 Calendar training on a quarterly basis.

Ensure that you schedule two to four hours per quarter to update the training and support plan, and that you continue to budget for staff training.

---

### 3 Keep the champion engaged.

Champions can sometimes disappear once the big event is past, and often the resources with them. We advise ensuring that a senior-level person keeps visibility and responsibility for the data system.



## Final Thoughts

### Enjoy the power of being a data-driven organization.

The word is out that mission- and data-driven organizations have a more positive organizational culture and accelerate their ability to do great work. By completing this process, you have made that commitment, and we hope it propels your organization forward on its mission.

“ Once you have the database, that doesn’t mean you have done it. ”

—Elena Chávez Quezada,  
Walter and Elise Haas Fund

# Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the many professionals who shared their time and expertise with us. *Making Wise Decisions* would not be nearly as useful without their input.

## Community-based Organizations

### Aim High

Russell Gong, Data Systems and Technology Manager;  
Alexis Bayley, Organizational Learning Specialist

### Centro Community Partners

Naldo Peliks, COO

### Family Resource Center of Truckee

Teresa Crimmens, Executive Director

### McKinleyville Family Resource Center

Hillarie Beyer, Executive Director; Robin Baker, COO

### Mindful Schools

Camille Whitney, Director of Research

### North Tahoe Family Resource Center

Ana Liz Servin, Program Manager; Anibal Cordoba Sosa,  
Family Support Manager

### On The Move

Alissa Abdo, Executive Director

### Partnership for Children and Youth

Andrea Broxton, Vice President, Operations

### School of Arts and Culture

Tamara Alvarado, Executive Director

### UpValley Family Centers

Jenny Ocón, Executive Director; Indira López,  
Program Director

### Village Community Resource Center

Kirsten Rigsby, Executive Director

## Data System Vendors

### AGH Strategies

Andrew Hunt, Principal

### Beezwax

Andrew Reichart, Director of Account Management

### Cityspan

Mark Min, Founder and CEO; Kara Johnson, Director of  
Business Development

### danabase technologies

Dana Hernandez

### Exponent Partners

Rem Hoffmann, Founder and CEO; Colleen McCarthy,  
Vice President of Business Development

### Neon CRM

Kyle Curry, Sales Manager

### nFocus Solutions

Ananda Roberts; President; Brian Brumme, Account  
Project Manager; Mark Claasen, Director of Product  
Management; Don Pruitt, Executive Vice President;  
Rick Reiman, Director of Sales

### Now IT Matters

Tim Lockie, Founder and President

### Pono Cloud Consulting

Harry Chiu, Managing Partner and Consultant

### Social Solutions

Alicia Woodward, Director of Product Marketing

### Foundations

#### **Edna McConnell Clark Foundation/PropelNext**

Karen Weisbrodt, Data Coach

#### **Pacific Foundation Services**

Amy Freeman, Senior Foundation Staff

#### **Salesforce.org**

Marc Baizman, Admin Evangelist

#### **Tipping Point Community**

Jamie Austin, Senior Director, Impact and Learning;  
Ashley Brown, Manager, Impact and Learning

#### **Walter and Elise Haas Fund**

Elena Chávez Quezada, Senior Program Officer,  
Economic Security

### Additional Interviewees

#### **Carson Research Consulting**

Taj Carson, CEO and Founder

#### **Sage70**

Isaac Shaalev, Founder

### Toolkit Funders

**S.H. COWELL  
FOUNDATION**



The project was generously funded by the **S.H. Cowell Foundation**, with additional support from the **Y. & H. Soda Foundation**.

### Project Team



**Consults**

#### **B3 Consults**

Betsy Baum Block

#### **Public Profit**

Corey Newhouse

Justine Wolitzer

Sam Adams

**Wire Media** designed the online quiz and this guide.  
[www.wiremedia.net](http://www.wiremedia.net)





**S.H. Cowell Foundation**

Anna Luna,  
*Program Associate*  
makingwisedecisions@shcowell.org  
(415) 397-0285

**B3 Consults**

Betsy Baum Block,  
*Principal*  
info@b3consults.com  
(510) 982-6126

**Public Profit**

Corey Newhouse,  
*Founder and Principal*  
info@publicprofit.net  
(510) 835-1669