Choosing a Charity CRM

Katie Eley
Matt Parker

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How to Choose a CRM

A guide for charities thinking about information systems

About the Authors

Matt has over 25 years experience in the voluntary sector, first as a youth worker and administrator at a youth charity, and then working with a number of charities helping to set up new projects, fundraise, and evaluate their work. He has also been a volunteer, trustee, and chair of various small community groups. Matt studied Maths at Keble College, Oxford, and gained a Masters in Social Policy at the London School of Economics, and is an ISO 27001 Certified ISMS Lead Implementer. He co-founded Lamplight in 2004.

Katie helps charities figure out their systems. She spent 5 years working in Learning and Development for a national autism charity. Her role there included data reporting, database management and basic IT training for support workers. She also organised a collaborative film project with service users to celebrate their achievements. Katie is active in her local gaming community and has a Masters in Screenwriting.

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Summary

CRM officially stands for Customer Relationship Management, but it's crept into the charity world even though it's a bit Corporate speak. For Charities, a CRM is really who you are working with, and what's happened. Some will be more focused on funders - so your 'C' there will be individual donors/supporters, trusts and foundations, and companies.

Choosing a CRM is hard. This book is designed to break down the process into five simple questions to help you make the best choice for your organisation.

Being asked (or deciding) to find a CRM can be overwhelming, which is why we have put this guide together. Lamplight is a CRM for charities, and we have been helping organisations like yours move to a digital solution for their data since 2004. We wanted to share our experience after implementing systems for many kinds of charity.

Don't feel like you need to do all of this at once – it may be helpful to read through the book once, and then take one question at a time to really get to the bottom of the challenges you are facing.

Once you can answer these questions, you'll have all the tools needed to choose the CRM that works best for you.

Contents

“We need a CRM” - What next?

Someone’s decided “we need a (new) CRM”. Perhaps it’s you - you can see that your current systems are slowing you down. Information is collected in different places, and generating reports takes ages. Your manager is fed up scrabbling around for numbers at the end of each month for their reports. Or your service users are fed up having to give the same information over and over.

Now here you are, with the job of “finding a new CRM”. Where to start? You can go and Google “charity CRM”, but then what? How are you doing to choose?

Is any of that familiar?

If you want to do a good job, it’s going to be worth spending a bit of time thinking and listening first.

We’ve talked to thousands of charities in just your position and have helped many of them. We want you to make the best choice for your organisation, so we’ve put together this document, based on our experience over the years.

This guide is intended for smaller non-profits who are thinking about a system to support their service delivery. By “smaller” we mean turnover of less than £1m.

If you’re thinking about fundraising and supporter management you should still find this useful, but it’s not the primary focus.

We’d suggest you read this with a notebook handy and start jotting down some thoughts as you go. You’ll need to speak to others to flesh things out, but starting to make notes early is usually good advice.

We’ve structured this around five questions to ask yourself:

Why?	Why do you need to change?
Who?	You’ll need to involve different people to understand what you need.
What?	The types of information you have, and what you need to be able to do with it.
When?	Thinking about timescales and capacity.
How much?	Looking into finances.

Part 1:

Why?

So here you are, looking for a CRM (or “database” or “system” or something similar). Why? Someone, possibly you, thought it’d be a good idea, presumably. If ‘a CRM’ is the solution, what’s the problem?

It may be worth asking your colleagues. Perhaps just a quick question like, “What are your biggest frustrations around our information / data?” in a team meeting, will generate some useful insights.

Write down: what’s the problem?

What’s the problem that ‘a CRM’ might solve?

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My guess is you'll have written something like "Our information is in lots of different spreadsheets and reporting is a nightmare". You might have identified a few different problems (there's two in that last example sentence).

The better you understand the problem, the better you'll be able to tell whether a CRM is the right answer for you, so next, dig into what you've written in a bit more detail.

Write down: really, what's the problem?

Split the problems you've found into small chunks and for each of them, ask yourself:

Who suffers from this problem? Admin staff? Service delivery staff? Volunteers? Managers? Trustees? Service users?

What's the impact for them? The same problem may have different impacts for each.

Can you quantify this at all? Can you time how long reporting takes, so instead of “Reporting is a nightmare”, you can say “Collating this information and producing six KPI figures took 9 hours”.

What are the root causes? Is “the problem” actually a symptom of a deeper problem? So, is “Our information is in lots of spreadsheets” really, “We have completely different, and incompatible, forms and processes in each of our services, for no good reason”? Maybe that is, in turn, a symptom?

That may all feel a bit negative, so now it’s time to look on the brighter side:

How could things be? What would you organisation be like with a good solution to these problems? Don’t think about the actual solution (yet) – for now, imagine it’s there and working well, whatever it is. What impact does that have?

Write down: imagine a better way

For each of the groups you identified (service users, managers etc), how is their life better now? What can they do now that they couldn't before? How do they feel about that?

What's the impact on the organisation overall?

Does this 'better way' match up with the expectations of whoever started this work?

Can this be quantified at all? For example, 4 service delivery staff each save 10 minutes a day finding case notes, so you would gain 2 days a month additional service delivery capacity (wow those minutes add up quickly!)

Solving these problems is going to be an investment: you'll spend time and money now to save it in the years to come. But the world is a changing place and so is your organisation. If your investment is really going to pay off, you need to try and include those changes in your thinking now.

Obviously, there's lots of uncertainty, but if your organisation has plans for the next few years, it's good to include them in your thinking as soon as you can.

Write down: our plans for the next few years

Are there any major plans for the next few years? For example, introducing a new service, or working in a new geographical area, or stopping a project?

If you've worked through these questions, you'll have a really great sense of where you are now, but also how much better things could be.

It's worth doing a check-in at this point. The larger the gap between where you are now, and how things could be, the more sense there is in spending time and effort closing the gap. But you might realise that some updates to your forms, and a spreadsheet in a shared folder really can do what you need.

If so, put this guide down, spend an afternoon sorting out your spreadsheets, share it with your team, and your job is done.

If the gap is larger and it's worth investing in a more comprehensive solution, read on.

Part 2:

Who?

Introducing a CRM, or whatever solution you end up with, is only partly a technical question about data. Primarily, it's a question about people. Some people like change; most tend to be more reluctant.

If you want to find a path to the better way you imagined earlier, you'll need to involve them and bring them along with you. The sooner you start, the easier it'll be.

Write down: who benefits?

Who will need to use this new system? In what ways will they use it?

Have you identified benefits earlier for the different users? If not, see if you can identify any now.

Who are the key decision makers around this?

Once you know who's affected, start talking to them. If you can, talk to them each directly, even if only for a few minutes. If you can't, email them, start a messaging channel in your chat system, add something to the team meeting agenda – whatever works for your situation.

Make sure everyone at least has an opportunity to talk to you.

You may also want to speak to trustees, or service users, or volunteers or funders at this point. Will they have perspectives that you'll miss otherwise?

Ask everyone: what do they do?

What do they do now – how do they store their data? How do they use it? How do they feel about the way things are now? Do they see opportunities to improve things? Don't forget about things that you may not think of as "data stores" – email groups, Mailchimp lists, phone contacts, and so on.

How do they feel about the idea of change? Is there anything worrying them right now?

Are they unusually positive about the idea? Keep an eye out for enthusiasts – people that can see the potential and might be willing to help and champion the changes later.

Having spoken to all these different people, think a bit about the process ahead of you. Whatever changes you end up making, in due course you'll want to form a project team to steer it.

And beyond that, once it's all in place, you'll need at least a couple of people who will need to 'own' the system, to take on tasks like adding new staff and removing old ones.

Write down: how are different people involved?

How involved might they want to be in the change project?

Thinking longer term, who's going to be the lead person for this once it's all in place? Who would be the system administrators?

Part 3:

What?

Let's review progress.

- You know what the problem is
- You know how things would be in an ideal world
- You know roughly who has what data now, and what they do with it
- You have a sense of different people's appetite for change

Now you should be ready to start thinking about what you need to get you from where you are to where you want to be.

From your conversations you should be able to start drawing together the answers to two key questions: across the organisation what information do we need, and what do we do with it?

Write down: what data do we need?

Who or what is the data about?

What broad categories of information do we gather for each?

You might find it helpful to start with a grid like the one you can find at **https://www.lamplightdb.co.uk/resources#choose.** Try and collate this across all your services, as far as possible. So even if one project is asking about health and another about education of service users, include it all in the 'service users' row. (There's a more detailed guide on that resources page you might want to look at).

You may want to add more columns to your table for further information, but even just this minimal version will be helpful.

CRMs aren't just passive stores of data. They can actively let you do the things you need to do.

Now ask yourselves: what does everyone need to be able to do with all this information? One helpful way to approach this is to write sentences in the form "<person> needs to be able to <action> with <data category>". For example, "Katie needs to send regular bulk reminders to her mentees", or "Managers need to be able to see total weekly numbers of referrals to service A".

Write down: what do we need to be able to do?

What does, or needs to, happen to the data you have?

Include things that happen now.

Also include things you might like to be able to do, but in a second list.

Thinking about your reporting too – how you report now, and maybe things you would like to report on, but can’t now.

And if you heard any opportunities for improvement, include these. For example, “Service delivery staff need a quicker way to collect Core 10 data from service users”.

Try not to get caught up in the detail of these, or how they might be accomplished. Focus on the what and maybe the why, not the how at this point.

There might be a lot of different ways for these things to be accomplished, some that you're not aware of right now. Katie's reminders might best be sent by post, email, automated phone call, SMS, WhatsApp group message, or carrier pigeon: for now, what's important is that we know that the mentees need to get an effective and timely reminder.

One final point for this section is about data confidentiality within your organisation. Do you have any regulatory or contractual requirements to keep certain data segregated, so that only some staff can see certain records? Or strong operational reasons to do so? For example, it's a common requirement that counsellors can only access the counselling notes for the people they are working with. A sexual health service may have strong operational reasons to keep their information separate.

It's common for people to want to over-engineer this and say that each member of staff should only see their own data. But what happens when they are off sick for a week, and there's an emergency but you can't get to the child's parents contact details because they are being worked with by that poorly colleague? Too much data segregation can have a cost in inconvenience and sometimes in money.

Where you do need to keep data separated, try to express the necessity. For example, “We are contractually obliged to keep counselling notes restricted from other counsellors”, or “We would prefer it if service delivery staff did not have access to organisation funding records”. That sense of necessity will help you to weigh up costs later.

Write down: confidentiality requirements

What regulatory, contractual, or legal requirements do you have around data segregation?

What data do you need to keep separate within the system?

Who is / will be responsible for managing this?

Part 4:

When?

You're nearly there. The last two sections may be connected, will almost certainly change from what you first write down, and shouldn't take too long to think about now.

Does your boss (or their boss) already have a target date in mind? If so, then that's your answer, for now. It may or may not be realistic and will change as you start to talk to possible suppliers. You may want to ask them how they came up with that date, though.

Hopefully, they were thinking about your organisation's planning and delivery cycles, funding and reporting arrangements, and maybe financial year.

We're often asked how long it takes to get a system in place. Unfortunately, the answer is "Anywhere between a couple of weeks and a couple of years", which isn't very helpful. Some of the factors that affect it are:

The complexity of your needs. If you have dozens of different services and hundreds of staff and volunteers, it's going to take more time to make sure your system will work for everything you do.

How much time you have available. Developing your system is a collaborative effort with your supplier and if you're squeezing this work in alongside all your other day- to-day tasks, it's going to take more time. This is partly why the question of costs and timescales are linked. If the project lead can have a decent chunk of dedicated time each week to it, the project will go a lot faster.

Your starting point. If you've worked your way through this guide reasonably diligently, you'll be off to a flying start. If you haven't, you are still going to have to do all this work, you'll just be doing it later. You'll also be doing this during the implementation process, which can mean the setup takes more time.

Your Supplier's starting point. Developing bespoke solutions takes much, much longer than configuring an existing product.

How much data migration you need. This can add time nearer the end of the project.

How many staff need training, and how easily it can be arranged. Like data migration, this can delay the go-live date.

How much involvement you want (and want to pay for) from your chosen supplier. The more that you choose to do yourself, the likelihood is that there's more for you to learn and figure out as you go. Ideally the collaboration is that you bring your expertise in your organisation and services and needs; and your supplier brings theirs in data and systems.

For a typical charity with turnover less than £1m, and some dedicated staff time, a typical timescale is between 3 and 6 months from starting work with your supplier to having a fully operational system in use.

Part 5:

How Much?

You're almost ready to start researching and talking to some suppliers to get an idea of costs. The costs you'll need to consider are:

One-off costs:

- System implementation costs
- Cost of staff time for setup
- Initial staff training costs
- Data migration costs

On-going costs:

- On-going licensing / hosting costs
- On-going support / training costs
- Your system management costs

Once you've got some sense of the costs from different suppliers, look back at the 'why' responses you wrote down at the start of this journey. Does the benefit you expect justify these costs?

Most software is hosted (cloud-based) nowadays. In the past you might have needed to think about servers and networks and things. But if you do look at software that you install yourself, you may need to check whether you need new computers or tablets, for example. You'll have an additional maintenance burden that you'll be responsible for too.

What Now?

If you've got this far, I'm going to assume that you need more than the equivalent of an extended mailing list in a spreadsheet.

You may wonder whether to employ developers to build you custom software. For smaller charities, the answer is almost certainly no. It will be very expensive, and take a lot longer, and cost a lot more in the long run to maintain, than buying existing software that's configured for you. There are several products on the market written for non-profits and you'll need to be sure of very significant savings and/or gains to re-invent those for yourself.

Your answers to part 3 of this guide will be your main checklist when talking to suppliers. You'll need to satisfy yourself that their product can store the types of information you've identified. And you'll want to know that it can do what you need with it. There may be some gaps: you'll need to decide how important these are.

You may also want to ask some overarching questions, such as:

- How is our data backed-up?
- Who owns our data? How can we get it back?
- What's the contract duration?
- How long are we locked into the system as it is?
- What's their approach to information security?
- How does support and training work?
- Where (physically) is our data? Where are the servers located?
- What are their values? Do they align with ours?
- What's their expertise in the voluntary sector?

Now you need to know who to approach. If you're not looking for a fundraising/membership system, Google isn't very helpful – those kinds of systems tend to dominate the search results.

Data Orchard are independent from any particular suppliers and have a listing **https://www.dataorchard.org.uk/resources/a-useful-list-of-crm-providers** and have other resources to help you get started.

Final Words

Choosing a CRM is hard, but hopefully after following this guide and asking yourselves five simple questions has helped you understand your needs and given you confidence to make the best decision for you.

If you have found this guide helpful, or have any kind of feedback, we'd love to hear from you. You can contact Lamplight directly at **hello@lamplightdb.co.uk**

We offer free demonstrations of our database, Lamplight, which you can book online. Lamplight has been working with charities for 20 years and thousands of staff at hundreds of charities use it every day. As a little bonus, tell us you finished the book when you speak to us, and **we'll add 4 free training credits** to your account.

You can also find more free resources on our website, **https://www.lamplightdb.co.uk/resources**

For charities and non-profits supporting people, your data is a vital resource. It supports your day to day work, and provides the foundational evidence you need to attract funding to continue.

If you know your existing systems aren't working for you, and you find yourself trying to navigate databases and CRMs: this book is for you. It's a short, simple, easy to follow guide, drawing on decades of experience helping charities make this journey.

It's not rocket science. It's not technical. You just need to know what questions to ask, and who to ask. Grab a pen, a notebook and a cuppa and you'll be on the way in no time.

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