The future of MIS

MIS is a crucial piece of the SBM puzzle. A comprehensive solution, it covers core database, statutory returns, timetabling, behaviour management, extra-curricular management, assessments and tracking, text and email, parents' evenings, online portals for staff, parents and students plus much, much more. Our experts explore some challenges, solutions and what the future holds for MIS

These days management information systems – MIS – are as familiar to SBMs as the sound of a school bell; this once unchartered territory has become a well-trodden path. For those interested in more than a basic understanding of what's on offer – and keen to learn about what the future holds – an assessment of current trends and developments is worthwhile.

Two distinct options have, traditionally, been preferred when working with MIS – a 'one stop shop' option and a general model. The first option allows users to gather all data together in a single space and to use it to perform the full range of administrative and financial tasks. "This saves heaps of time, especially as lots of modern systems now offer communications, staffing and pupil data all in one place," says David Collins, project manager at Scholar Pack. In contrast, the general model requires MIS to integrate with other back office and/or financial software.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Perhaps, however, it's the dependence on technology in recent years that's the most significant development for SBMs considering updating their MIS package or, indeed, thinking of switching provider. Put simply, the reliability of a user-friendly and efficient package can't be underestimated. It's with some trepidation, then, that SBMs will view a switch and may well be nervous of the future.

For example, will an upgrade disrupt infrastructure and essential financial functioning and timetabling? How can existing data be protected from the possibility of loss prior to migration to a new system? Geoff Chandler, managing director at Moxton Education, explains that another key challenge is the so-called 'cost of change'. "This expenditure is the hidden one that increases MIS costs above and beyond the licencing and any hardware that maybe needed," he says. "For example, as MIS has become more widely used in schools it's no longer just the domain of the school business manager; most school staff will regularly interact with the system. Thus, many staff need to be re-trained – and quickly – so that the school can stay operational and information effective; the cost of releasing staff to do this must also be factored in."

> By combining the finance element with the recruitment element you can start to see beneath the headlines

Despite the challenges, solutions are plentiful and the future, even for those of a nervous disposition, is promising. More importantly, current innovations look set to redefine business decision-making for the better. For instance, Graham Reed, project manager at Group Call, says that SBMs would be wise to review their MIS and identify which areas they can strengthen rather than bowing to the ▶

Jay Oram, digital marketing manager at Bromcom Computers offers his top tips to maximise your MIS

1. If you are looking to get the best from your MIS it needs to be a team effort. You have built a crack team of staff and they have grand ideas of what they want an MIS to do; the key to making this happen is keeping that channel of communication open with your supplier. User group meetings, active forums and a good development roadmap all play a big part.
2. When choosing your MIS make sure you receive a one-hour overview from each supplier and then invite them back to deliver an all-day workshop with as many of your team as possible. The best way to test how user-friendly a system is is to get hands on!
3. Each MIS provider has its own strengths; cloud solutions are the most cost-effective, secure and up-to-date systems available. Choose a provider you trust and can work with. The latest systems are all very similar in features so focus on the number of updates, support and the training they can provide.

traditional idea that switching MIS provider to a new model will be best. "Switching to something new because it is new does not guarantee value or success. Many SBMs are looking outside of just the traditional MIS vendors for solutions and looking to platforms that provide many of the key functions for the majority of their staff. These then synchronise with the existing MIS."

> ## The key is to make sure that any MIS is able to interoperate with other school tools

Similarly, Will Jordan, education sector manager at PS Financials, says that schools are thinking things through carefully and asking, "Which data do we actually require?" meaning that bad data, or data that's no longer of any practical value, isn't converted to new systems when data migration takes place. Geoff adds that compiling relevant information requires thorough planning. "Many schools have a lot of legacy data in their MIS so data-cleansing is key before transition. Remember that what comes out in terms of reports is only, of course, as good as what goes in in terms of data!" The old adage of 'rubbish in, rubbish out' still holds true!

A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

In terms of the evolution of MIS it's fair to assume that data analytics hold the key to the future. The theory is that SBMs will be able to interrogate data in more detail much more quickly and improve financial decision-making by compiling numerical data and statistics in ways that have, hitherto, been impossible or very time-consuming. As Graham explains, this approach is becoming highly valued. "Presenting key insights from the wealth of data now available is the real trick, helping educators make informed decisions. This is the future for MIS and for anyone providing platforms to schools."

Will provides a good example of the potential of this technology, suggesting that it could transform how SBMs manage short and long-term financial planning. "In financial systems you always have a category that looks at how much money was spent on recruitment costs but what that doesn't tell you is whether the school has been doing a lot of recruitment or spending a lot of money using a recruitment firm," he says. "By combining the finance element with the recruitment element you can start to see beneath the headlines. So, upon more detailed review, an SBM might say, 'This year, while we have spent a lot of money on recruitment, we had to do that because we needed

a whole new team or we have just added a Sixth Form.'"

Aside from data analytics there remains one other core consideration that schools will want to keep a beady eye on – the integration of MIS and Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) solutions. Geoff summarises the importance of this partnership. "The key here is to make sure that any MIS is able to interoperate with other school tools, or has the ability to do so in the future. Open standards and an MIS that is easy to share data with other tools, is key as the MIS must always stay as the primary data source." There's also value to be found in improving existing applications – something that Graham Cooper, head of product strategy at Capita Sims, says is easily achievable. "Many suppliers offer blogs and videos which talk you through short cuts or innovative ways to use your system, plus there are webinars and specific training courses on offer too," he comments.

SBMs are dab hands where MIS are concerned but for those keen to move with the times there are clear opportunities to speak with their providers about future developments and where savings can be made. Review of each system is for individual schools to consider and is a recommended starting point before investigating if current innovations – most notably, data analytics – which the experts suggest will prove to be transformative. ∎