Get control of your employee records

Every business eventually outgrows Excel. If you're ready to get your HR files in order, here are some software options to consider.

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Talent management software
Nittany Embroidery & Screen printing saved $10,000 in staff costs after investing in software to automate employee productivity and performance tracking. We checked in with four more small businesses for details on their HR software of choice.

NEW YORK (CNNMoney.com) -- *Question:* I have a small veterinary practice with 10 employees. What is a good program to use to make a database about my employees, with photos, contact info, salaries, information on their last raise, etc.?

HR software can help you streamline your employee records.

-Deborah, Fremont, Calif.

Dear Deborah: Even small businesses can outgrow Excel spreadsheets to manage employee information. At a certain point, the paperwork for tracking payroll, benefits, and performance information becomes too unwieldy. Enter an HR management system.

Despite the fancy acronyms, HRMS (Human Resource Management Systems) and HRIS (Human Resources Information Systems) software packages aren't necessarily enterprise (read: "expensive") applications with a confusing array of features. An HR system organizes recruitment, payroll, performance evaluations and benefits administration into a centralized system, but these applications can be simplified for small-business needs.

Before investing in a system, each business has to decide between two paths: a hosted solution or an in-house one. Hosted software frees you from investing in hardware and from regular maintenance and upgrade work. It means getting up and running faster, makes it easier to get new features and upgrades, and requires less downtime to fix problems.

On the other hand, some business owners prefer to keep systems in-house. They'd rather maintain direct control of the applications they're using and the kind of data being stored.

Here's a quick primer on some of the available software packages that may work for you. We've started off with the most basic programs and worked up to the more advanced offerings.

Ajiva's [SimpleHR](#): One of the least-expensive products around, SimpleHR stores salary history, benefits, performance reviews, training schedules, vacation dates and incident reports, in addition to basic personnel information. Priced at $199, SimpleHR can integrate withIntuit's ([INTU](#)) popular QuickBooks accounting software. A Windows product, it runs on a single PC. A multi-user version, for two to five computers, is also available for $395. The single-user version is limited to storing data for 50 employees or fewer.

SimpleHR allows documents such as letters (offer, welcome, termination), evaluations, and surveys to be attached to employee records. The software also creates benefit forms defining each employee's benefit plan, eligibility dates, premiums, and beneficiaries. The "safety" module is a unique feature, allowing employers to enter work-related incidents and accidents for each employee. It can also track workers' compensation claims.

The information is all accessible through a graphical dashboard, and can be exported to a variety of applications, such as Microsoft's Visio, and imported from other applications, such as Excel.

[People-Trak HR](#): People-Trak HR starts off very affordably and becomes more expensive as you add additional staff and functionality. For a one-time fee of $20 per user, the software offers databases for tracking salaries, work hours, benefits and performance reviews, among other features. It even includes a module for tracking COBRA information for former employees.

For an additional $20 per employee, People-Trak has a Web add-on with self-service functionality. A more advanced version of the software, "Strategic HR," includes advanced workflow features and costs $40 per employee.

[OrangeHRM](#): Every software list needs at least one open-source application. First released in 2005, OrangeHRM is a flexible HR package that is available both as a hosted service and as an in-house solution. The software takes a modular approach typically seen in more expensive, enterprise packages: HR functions are broken out into pieces, allowing your business to pick and choose which features it needs.

An administrative module serves as OrangeHRM's backbone, and additional components store employee information (photos too!), vacation schedules, benefits and salary details. A reporting module lets managers mine the data for analytics, and a self-service module helps employees update their own data.

OrangeHRM is free and runs on Windows and Linux. If installing and maintaining your own open-source software sounds intimidating, you can buy a professional support contract - OrangeHRM offers a one-month "starter kit" for $60. OrangeHRM is also available as an online subscription service, with rates starting at $45 per month for up to 10 employees.

[EmpXtrack Starter Edition](#): EmpXtrack's Starter Edition, priced from $600, offers an employee database, payroll software, and a self-service module that allows employees to edit and view their information. Pricing varies by the number of users and the edition purchased.

A Web-based tool, EmpXtrack Starter Edition stores employee information such as job histories, organization charts, salary information, benefits and leave data. Advanced configurations, starting at $1,050, include expense reporting and timesheet functionality.

Microsoft: For businesses that rely heavily on Microsoft ([MSFT](), [Fortune 500]()) technologies, a look at [Microsoft Dynamics]() might be in order. Microsoft's Dynamics NAV (formerly Navision) and GP (formerly Great Plains) are full-featured, robust "enterprise resource planning" (ERP) packages with deep HR management functionality. For a small firm, deploying Dynamics would be like swatting flies with a bulldozer, but if your company is poised for aggressive growth, planning ahead and investing in ERP solution like Dynamics could be the way to go.

With NAV, HR departments can maintain comprehensive employee records, track leave and absences and inventory equipment assigned to workers. GP can be used to manage personnel information, benefit programs, and payroll. It can also integrate with third-party payroll service providers such as ADP.

If you'd like more options, software information Web site Capterra has a nice [comparison wizard]() that can help identify which products will fit your needs. The wizard asks for information on your intended number of users, your platform (what operation system you run - Windows, Linux or Mac), your desired features and the size of your business. Based on that data, it generates a list of options that you can use as a starting point in the quest for the perfect HRMS for your business.

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