

# MIS – Friend or Foe?



When I was a Head of Department, the MIS (Management Information Systems) that the school used was only available on a few administrators' computers. If I wanted to use it, it took about 5 minutes to find a friendly secretary, who didn't mind me using her computer and give me another quick training session.

Thankfully those days are gone with the new management information systems that are available to schools and perhaps they can be viewed more as a friend than a foe. To judge the friendliness of your own system, ask yourself the following questions: Is all the data in one, accessible place on your school database or do you have to search through various different modules, or click endlessly to locate what you need? Whilst a cumbersome program or manual system may be a frustrating waste of time during a normal school day, it's different when you and your team are under pressure during a short notice inspection, that's when ease of access and ease of use really count.

Is the data available only on your school site or do you have internet access to your MIS? Internet access allows you freedom to work where you want, when you want, either during the inspection or your normal working day. But a word of warning, hosted MIS are a lot quicker and you don't have the disadvantage of having to install expensive DSL internet lines, particularly important for small schools. (Something else to think about: if your MIS is web based or your data can be accessed off-site, ask the company if it has been tested by one of the web security testing

companies as it will give you reassurance about the security of your information. Don't forget that you are responsible for data protection breaches when data keys get lost so it's a good idea to know where your information is and who is accessing it. A good MIS will help you secure your data).

Don't be misled into thinking that just because you're in a small school that an MIS won't help. Small schools tend to rely on one person who can find their way through either the A4 ring binder, spreadsheet, or homemade database that they have created perhaps baffling the rest of the team. (As an aside, consider the implications of having a home grown database, with security, upgrades, maintenance, support and intellectual property issues when its creator leaves your school). MIS have been shown to strengthen the bond between the teaching and admin team, helping both small and large schools to work efficiently.

If you do have a home grown version of an MIS, then the Parent Portal is one module that you may have difficulty implementing and is one of the powerful connections that you have to your parent community. The next question is, do you have an effective Parent Portal? A good and modern Parent Portal will allow you to disseminate a whole host of important information and it is a good way of connecting people without the costs involved in paper. Independent school parents tend to be sophisticated users of technology and prefer communicating in this way. Schools can take advantage of this within a controlled environment of a Parent Portal.

Setting up a Parent Portal can be a good catalyst to analyse whether you, the school and your MIS are performing school tasks in the most cost, personnel and resource effective way. It may help to draw up a work flow diagram showing the stages and procedures for example, to produce the end of year reports. The information in the Parent Portal is the end point, map the steps that your school currently takes to achieve it and consider if the process can be streamlined or changed.

Within this analysis, try to work out which MIS modules will help and not hinder the process. Sometimes when purchasing an MIS, it's easy to be drawn into the wow factor of the number of functions the program has, but many may be completely irrelevant to you. Or the management of these modules may be so difficult, requiring specialist knowledge, that they really don't help your school at all.

Finally, don't be afraid of asking your MIS supplier for advice. They've spoken to many Heads and seen many schools in action and you should be able to draw on their experience. If they are not the type of company to give advice, but just want to sell instead, perhaps consider changing your MIS supplier.

#### For further information:

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