

Department Programs Do a Better Job Monitoring Contracts

The Division of Administration now receives 98 percent of the required information regarding each program's monitoring activities, a jump from 60 percent three years ago.

Problem

Lori Riehn noticed a problem with how department employees reported their monitoring activities on more than 2,000 active contracts. Though employees tried to enter consistent monitoring information into Microsoft Excel, the preformatted spreadsheet proved problematic. One employee might enter “yes” to indicate an affirmative response to a required data field, and another might enter “agree” to indicate a yes response. The variations made it very difficult to analyze data on a macro level.

“Spreadsheets should never have been used to capture such data,” says Lori Riehn, the Division of Administration’s grants monitoring coordinator.

Additionally, many employees did not know the difference between vendor and “subrecipient” contracts, so they often failed to enter correct monitoring information about the latter every six months.

A vendor contract, for example, is when department staff purchases a product like pencils from an approved vendor.

In a subrecipient contract, the department “passes-through” grant funds to another entity. For instance, the department might pass grant funds to a medical clinic to perform mammography services because department staff is unable to provide those services directly. When that occurs, department employees have a responsibility to monitor the clinic to ensure the grant funds are used for authorized purposes and as required by the grant agreement and applicable laws, regulations or policies. Knowing the difference between the two types of contracts is important because subrecipient contracts have more stringent compliance requirements.

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Lori Riehn, the Division of Administration's grants monitoring coordinator

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Finally, employees had a hard time updating and tracking their contractors' risk designations. Those designations, required by the federal government, indicate whether doing business with a contractor carries a high, medium or low risk.

Plan

Riehn met with her supervisor Pat Bedell, the Division of Administration's deputy director, and outlined the challenges employees had monitoring their contracts. Riehn believed it was time to forsake the spreadsheets and develop a Microsoft Access database that would automatically populate specific tracking fields for employees and allow for consistency in reporting.

"What if they no longer had to know the difference between vendor and subrecipient contracts?" she asked. Riehn could automatically populate that field and the fields for contract numbers, contract dates and other data, reducing the need for employees to rekey information every reporting period. "Think of the improved accuracy, the savings in time," she said.

Riehn could even design the database so that it would restrict certain answers to "yes" or "no" and track report due dates for employees, much like Microsoft Outlook prompts staff about upcoming meetings. Bedell agreed.

Do

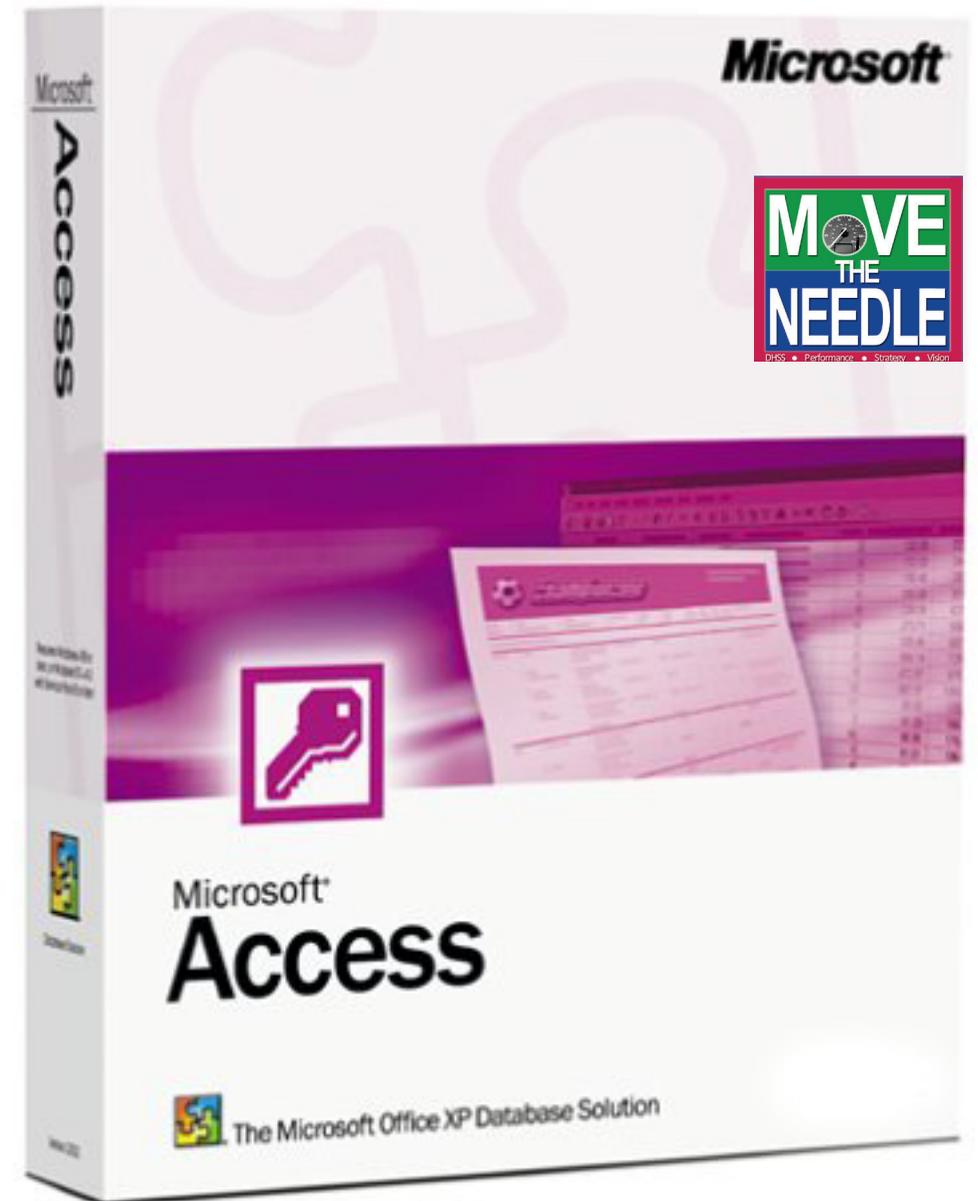
Riehn developed the Subrecipient Monitoring Tracking System database in six months. Employees transitioned to it over 10 months, after receiving an initial, mandatory four-hour database training from Riehn.

Check/Act

Riehn continues to improve the database since its mid-2011 launching. Employees offer suggestions, and they also have the opportunity to evaluate the training. Their responses are favorable. One seemed to sum up the sentiments of many and wrote, "Thank you for making the monitoring process easy."

The results speak volumes. Today the Division of Administration receives 98 percent of the required information regarding each program's monitoring activities, a jump from 60 percent three years ago. The Department of Social Services has even asked for information on how DHSS implemented its Subrecipient Monitoring Tracking System.

As the saying goes, imitation is the highest form of flattery.



Lori Riehn, the Division of Administration's grants monitoring coordinator, developed a Microsoft Access database that automatically populates specific tracking fields for employees and allows for consistency in reporting.