

NVR Software vs a VMS — Decision Worksheet

Six questions decide whether a recorder is enough or you need a video management system. Answer them, then check the capability and licensing notes.

The six questions

Ask yourself	Yes	No
Just one physical site?	recorder	VMS
32 cameras or fewer?	recorder	VMS
All from one camera brand?	recorder	VMS
Only basic motion — no analytics?	recorder	VMS
No access control or alarms to integrate?	recorder	VMS
A few operators on shared logins?	recorder	VMS

All six “Yes” → a recorder is enough. Any one “No” → you are buying a VMS, whatever the box is labelled.

What each one does

NVR software (a recorder)	A VMS adds
Find IP cameras (ONVIF)	Many sites managed as one (federation)
Record streams to disk	Role-based access control
Live view + playback	Analytics + forensic search
Basic motion + alerts	Access control + alarm integration
One local site	Failover redundancy; many brands at scale

Scale & licensing — where the real bill is

Recorders are sold in fixed 8 / 16 / 32-channel blocks; most VMS platforms license per channel, so you pay for the cameras you run. Cost scales with cameras, but the real bill scales with sites and integrations: 9 cameras at one site is recorder territory; 9 cameras at each of 11 sites is a VMS, because 11 standalone recorders are 11 islands to manage, update, and watch separately.

The bottom line

A recorder is enough if...	You need a VMS if...
One site, 32 or fewer same-brand cameras, no analytics beyond motion, nothing else to integrate, and a handful of users on simple logins.	Any one of: a second site, a second camera brand, real analytics, access-control or alarm integration, audit-grade user roles, or growth you can already see coming.

Standards: a recorder and a VMS share the ONVIF recording (Profile G) and streaming (Profile S / T) layer. Decide on the 18–36 month plan, not the opening-day camera count.