

# Overcoming the myth of integrated technology

Contributed by Charles Johnston, 2007

With the ever increasing pressures we all seem to be working under, the last thing most of us need is the prospect of having to install, commission and train the team on a new IT system, writes Charles Johnston.

What core functions need to be present in technology systems for FM?

What are the potential benefits for the client and supply chain in an integrated IT system?

Experience has shown us that far from doing 'what it says on the tin' or even what that ever-so-slick sales team demonstrated, the reality of new technology is often more work and disruption to the business. This is then followed by the inevitable disappointment and explanations to the board as to why our new investment hasn't delivered the promised benefits to the business.

But against this, we are all facing the mounting pressures of legislation and performance targets (SLAs, KPIs and the like) with the accompanying increased measurement mechanisms ensuring that staying as we are isn't an option either. Our existing systems invariably don't perform as we need them to and the manual paper systems are engulfing us, causing more devastation to the tree population than even Richard Branson's carbon offsetting planting programme can keep up with. This all results in us spending more time, proving to the bureaucrats that we are doing the job we are paid for than actually getting on with it...

But what if technology could really help? What if it was designed to match our particular requirements rather than a one-size-fits-all overly complicated solution that we have to adapt our working practices to suit, rather than the other way around? What if it was actually simple enough in its operation to really help us, yet had the features to give us the increased functionality, measurement and reporting capabilities required by today's business and the FM environment?

There is a better solution.

A solution to the challenge of integration

IPG's award-winning fmNet technology provides task and process management information systems developed over the past five years, initially by FM people for FM people. In recent applications, IPG has become more involved with the processes particular to client core business as well as the 'traditional' FM functions.

The integration process this represents is a key element we need to be specifying when considering technology systems and their application for our businesses. For a new IT system to really help your business, it needs to incorporate these core functions and tasks as well as specialist areas such as planned and reactive maintenance.

Could this approach actually end up making our lives simpler, with one system giving us high-level trends and management information to assist us in our everyday responsibilities, yet with the underlying granular detail available within 2-3 clicks when needed?

This is where fmNet and the range of bespoke specialised systems such as Centremonitor and CareHomeMonitor can help provide improvement to core business. These systems are designed to simplify the IT processes and remove the confusion often experienced with multiple applications running together where overlap causes loss of confidence in the data and therefore the overall solution.

So how might an integrated system work in practice, and what are the benefits for the client and the supply chain in such an approach?

PRUPIM see the benefits

Take as an example the portfolio of 13 shopping centres operated by Prudential Property Investment Managers (PRUPIM), one of the leading real estate investment managers in the UK.

To achieve their desire to be considered the best property investment company, they approach people, property and customers in a way that delivers levels of performance and service for their tenants that far exceeds the norm found in the UK market.

Historically, these centres had been supported by a variety of various service providers working to varying specifications and service level contracts. PRUPIM took the decision to achieve a fully harmonised and converged operations solution, in particular identifying certain criteria as key to the final solution:

- Consistency of operational management process;
- Streamlined supply chain;

- Economy of scale through consolidation and leverage;
- Improved communications in a 'one team, one focus, one system' approach;
- BSI accreditation for all the centres via a common process system to underline the emphasis on quality delivery. Having identified that a process and information management portal was fundamental to the success of this convergence project, the usual range of off-the-shelf software systems was explored and then rejected as unsuitable or insufficient for these more exacting parameters.

As a result following a detailed due diligence process, IPG was selected as the technology partner to develop fmNet into a bespoke Web-based solution specifically to meet the precise needs of the convergence project. The solution has been labelled Centremonitor.net and has been designed to meet all contractual, statutory and operational reporting requirements.

Combined with these are highly practical and efficient management information tools that are kept as simple as possible to assist in the overall efficiency and productivity levels for all those involved: internal PRUPIM management, staff and their external service provider teams.

Practicality is an important consideration in the development process, and this is where the experience of IPG as practical FM people rather than just IT professionals was crucial in dealing with the inevitable issues that arise in a project such as this - including making the solution easy to navigate for all levels of user from engineers and helpdesk operators to project administrators and senior management.

The Centremonitor.net solution has resulted in measurable hard and soft benefits for PRUPIM and their supply chain, which was involved in the convergence project. The general quality and efficiencies of contracted services have been improved considerably, and the streamlined processes have made significant financial savings within the first year following installation.

The system's clear and accurate reporting has enabled the optimised use of resources, as well as providing the entire supply chain management with real-time access to first class and accurate data to make more informed decisions.

#### Confirmation of success

This example shows that when handled correctly, with client and suppliers working together in an open, collaborative and positive fashion, serious improvements can be made to the benefit of all those involved. For Centremonitor and the convergence project, this has been recognised with the 2006 i-FM e-Business award.

Independently, the robustness of the process management approach has been verified by the BSI in the award of the PAS99 standards for the Cribbs Causeway shopping centre in an unprecedented six weeks, rather than the more usual 12 months, a glowing endorsement indeed.

So in conclusion, with the right attitude, process planning, participants and systems you can deliver huge benefits to your business without the 'no gain without pain' that is the more usual experience. However, clear vision and leadership by a determined and supportive client is a prerequisite for any project such as this, as well as no little courage to see it through to completion.

We are in exciting times for the FM industry and must stand up to ever more exacting requirements from our clients. However, focused technology systems, properly designed and executed, can be the enabler for you to provide more cost-effective services for these clients while still maintaining a healthy margin for your own organisation. Truly a win-win solution.

#### About the author

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