Meeting evolving needs with Infra technology

The Northern Ireland Department for Regional Development chooses Infra technology to manage its extended support network

Altnaheglish Water Reservoir in Northern Ireland

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) was created in 1999 by the Departments Order (Northern Ireland), which set up devolution (i.e. the transfer to self-government) in Northern Ireland. DRD is responsible for roads and transportation, water and sewerage services, the Regional Development Strategy 2025 and ports and airports.

As an organization with over 5,000 employees and an annual spend totalling over £520 million, it is key that the DRD is effective at managing and monitoring its resources.

Daily operations within the DRD rely on networked PCs running Microsoft business software. To support its IT internal customers, the central IT department, Information Systems Unit (ISU) relies on an Infra technology solution.

Implementing the Infra Solution

Based in Belfast, the ISU supports people in 150 different buildings using Infra Service Desk for its main help desk. There are also a number of 'satellite' helpdesks supporting specific groups within the DRD that use the Infra system.

According to Michael Harnett, Help Desk Manager at DRD, "With our old system the reporting function was non-existent and the user information had to be re-keyed every time you logged a call, which was very time-consuming.

"Now we have over 100 help desk staff using Infra technology and are able to log all calls to the help desk from across the DRD and manage them more effectively. We have a much better picture of the number and type of calls we receive and how well we perform against our targets," he said.

"The improved quality of service we were able to provide after the first implementation of Infra ensured that the management team were prepared to invest further in Infra technology to bring the rest of the organization up to the same standards."

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Originally to replace an old system that was not 2000 compliant, the ISU (then supporting just the Department of Environment) initiated a tender process and from the final three companies, selected Infra.

Under devolution in 1999, the responsibilities of the old Department of Environment were in the main divided up between a new DOE and DRD, with some of its smaller agencies going towards making up some of the other new departments. The ISU took responsibility for the two new departments and also gained responsibility for Culture, Arts and Leisure in April 2001.

As the demands on the department have grown, Infra has enabled the main help desk to implement a call management hierarchy, to ensure all calls are effectively logged and managed.

For example, calls from the Driver Vehicle Testing Agency, Public Records Office, Driver Vehicle Licensing NI and Water Services staff are logged by their own satellite help desk. If the problem cannot be solved here, they are escalated to the central help desk. Throughout this process the calls are logged so that each one is carefully tracked and monitored.

At the same time, the call routing needs to be secure, such that calls between the Water Service desk and central help desk, for example, cannot be accessed by the Roads Service team.

"We do have quite a complex hierarchy for managing calls," said Harnett. "But the great thing about Infra is that it allows us to partition each Agency/Branch, so each satellite help desk sees only their own work, while centrally we can see the whole picture."

Improving service levels

Infra technology can also be tailored to match specific department requirements. For example, the DVLNI had six existing contracts from three different suppliers for outsourced IT services, each with its own service level agreement and penalties.

Using Infra, it was possible to set up a monitoring service that enabled the DVLNI to track breaches of service.

Moving to next generation web based technology

Choosing Infra technology also enabled the department to make the transition to web technology, without making any significant re-investment. As the help desk system is web-based, the engineers can update their calls on site, giving much more realistic performance figures.

The performance management reports also give the IT team the information they need to measure performance against targets - previously they had no way of doing this. The fact that all work is logged will enable the team to track work carried out for different departments, a useful facility as they consider moving to a charge back system for work executed.

Increased productivity using automated systems

The ISU already use the Infra system to run a regular customer survey to 20% of the staff that they support (and to 100% of the Roads Service staff) and have again benefited from time-savings.

"We run a weekly survey against a random subset of calls and we then follow up any below satisfactory ratings and negative comments. Previously it took one person over half a day a week to manage the survey. Now that it's automated it takes just a couple of minutes," said Harnett.

The group has also utilized Infra's change module to implement an automated work request system to request new IS services or to purchase new IT equipment. All new requests are routed to a mailbox that generates an automatic work request and a work response number. These are then sent to the designated person responsible for creating the required tasks. The requestor receives an automated email reply listing their request and the Work Request number allocated to the request.

"For one manager we even export the work requests into MS project. With a Gantt chart the manager responsible is able to see his whole team's work visually on one sheet, making it much easier to manage," said Harnett.

Following the success of the Infra system to date, the department is now also implementing a configuration management system. The Infra system will integrate with the Microsoft SMS database that holds the specification and location details of all the PCs that are on the network. Infra will interrogate the database and populate the configuration management database with the information, removing the need to key in all the data for over 5000 users manually – a considerable time saving.

"Ultimately the configuration management database will be used to manage our three year PC replacement policy. It is an easy way of identifying those PCs that are due for replacement, and of course, assessing the actual value of the assets," said Harnett.

"Using Infra technology has enabled us to better manage our calls and provide IT support for our customers. Because the Infra team understand our business they keep me informed of relevant new technologies and we are continuing to work with them to implement new ways of improving our service performance," he concluded.