



Making public sector transformation a success

One consequence of the change in Northern Ireland's political landscape and the move to devolution was the increase in the number of government departments from six to eleven. While the significance of power sharing was welcomed, it presented some administrative challenges and compounded a problem that the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) had been doing its best to address.

There had been an earlier attempt to move the six departments to common financial software. In the larger, modified structure some of the newly formed departments had no accounting systems of their own, as responsibility for delivery of accounting services remained with the original six departments in a provider/receiver arrangement.

The decision was taken by the Department of Finance and Personnel to set up a financial processing centre for all of NICS. Acknowledging the scale of the project, the Department spent over a year exploring the exact requirement and preparing the way for a procurement exercise.

"It is important to understand that it was a business transformation project," said John Crosby, Chief Executive Officer of Account NI, the organisation set up to run the proposed centre. "We wanted companies with the capability to manage the delivery of a project of this scale."

Challenge

Driving the Account NI project was an opportunity to improve payment turnaround times, to capture information that would support better planning and budgeting, and to allow departments to redeploy people to front line services.

In 2006, the contract was won by a strategic ICT services partnership headed up by BT. Under the

terms of the 12-year contract, BT, Accenture and Northgate Information Solutions would move the departments to a common financial system and set up a shared services centre, manned and run by the civil service.

Centralising the financial systems in a shared service centre had the potential to deliver huge efficiencies. Processing times for payments could be improved; money would be saved because it would be easier to manage and maintain a single system, and a single source of financial data would enable better reporting, giving NICS information to better inform its decision-making going forward.

The objective was to deliver common processes to 11 departments with offices dispersed across the province. The programme would involve 1,300 core users of the financial systems along with up to 20,000 civil servants who use the system for expenses or procurement purposes.

John Manifold, Programme Manager at BT, recognised from the outset that it was about process change as much as technology and equipment. Moving all the departments to a shared model would only succeed if the processes were consistent across the organisation. "The equipment is the lowest risk part of the programme," he said, "the departments were running a variety of systems, but more crucially, they were managing their systems in different ways around procurement, handling income and reporting."

As well as assuming overall control for the project and programme management, BT was responsible for training and ensuring a smooth transition from the legacy systems. Accenture's expertise was in the area of financial shared services and applications while Northgate provided a bulk cheque printing service and financial architecture.

Case Study

Account NI

Implementation

Because of the project size, the decision was taken to build a 'common footprint' solution. All the functionality would be assembled and then deployed in a series of five waves across government.

The solution was initially built for implementation in the Department of Finance and Personnel, the programme sponsor, and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The development process took 18 months but at the end there was a common solution ready to be rolled out to all departments. The last wave went live in July 2009.

The shared service centre was developed simultaneously, staffed by 220 civil servants and based on four functions - procure to pay, bill to cash, record to report and a service desk. The first point of contact for enquiries is the service desk which is manned by NICS staff. If it is a technical query, it is passed through to BT.

Oracle financial software is the main engine that sits at the heart of the system, with each process supported by integrated modules. In addition, a ReadSoft scanning solution is used for invoice processing and Cognos software has been deployed for reporting. "These are all very significant systems and each presented their own challenges during the implementation" said Manifold.

All applications and the core infrastructure are hosted in BT's Belfast data centre, with a second BT facility used for disaster recovery. Wrapped around it all is a service management piece also supplied by BT.

A big challenge was addressing the culture change part of the transformation. BT handled the employee training through a combination of face-to-face courses, attended by 5,000 employees over a period of 18 months, and a self-service e-learning programme. When the system went live, BT was still on the ground with just-in-time support to ease in the change.

Benefits

The scale and complexity of the project called for BT to come up with a build and development programme that would allow the different departments and agencies to easily swap out the old systems and adopt the new. The five wave programme was designed to facilitate the change.

"If we were doing it again we would do the roll out exactly the same way, it was a great success. It is not a system that could have ever been assembled piecemeal. The model BT used, with the common footprint, worked really well."

John Crosby
Chief Executive Officer of Account NI

The culture change piece, which has been the downfall of many large scale transformation projects, was also managed effectively thanks to the extensive BT training programme. "Training was one of the most successful parts of it," said Crosby, "and because it's a single system it means people are much more flexible. They can change departments without having to retrain."

For suppliers, the system was an improvement because all invoices now go to the same place, making it easier to engage with government while reducing the risk of duplication. The common chart of accounts will also make it possible to review spending and improve procurement.

While it is too soon to reap all the rewards of the common system in terms of cost-savings and efficiencies, Crosby had no doubt that Account NI will deliver benefits long into the future. "They will take time to work through the system, but at least we now have something that is adaptable. It's about having a foundation for reacting to any changes that might happen in the future."

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Registered office: Grand Canal Plaza,
Upper Grand Canal Street, Dublin 4.
Phone +353 (0)1 4325000
Freephone 1800 924 924
Registered in Ireland No. 141524

Riverside Tower,
5 Lanyon Place, Belfast, BT1 3LP.
Phone +44 (0)28 9021 6161
Freephone 0800 800 152

