

February 2, 2015

We visited WDH Ltd <http://www.wdh.co.uk/> to gain some appreciation of their Development and use of Mobile Technology, particularly in relation to Tenancy Visits.

Guy Close has provided an excellent summary of the visit.

The following is entirely my interpretation of Wakefield & District Housing's Mobile Tablet / Touch Screen development as they described it.

My personal background is in computing systems development, and I was very interested in observing how WDH's Mobile Solutions linked to and worked with their current back-end Relational Database / Desktop Systems supplied by Capita <http://www.capita.co.uk/>

Mobile System Development

WDH Administer and Manage 31,000 homes, in a mixed urban-rural environment.

The Mobile System supplier was decided via a tendering process and the decision made to proceed on a 3 year Mobile Technology System with the then current WDH System provider Capita <http://www.capita.co.uk/>, teamed with Total Mobile <http://totalmobile.co.uk/>.

Initial attempts were made to mirror desktops to mobile tablets in the field utilising citrix <http://www.citrix.com/> software, using Dell Windows7 Tablets as remote mobile devices, but this had been a failure because:

- The high level of network traffic involved in the mirroring process resulted in poor performance
- Tablets/Mobile Phones have very different screen presentation and manipulation methods – no mouse for example, and manipulation is done by touch, long press, pinch and zoom gestures etc.
- Mobile displays are much smaller – and desktops displays do not scale well – acceptable text on a 22 inch display can be unreadable on say a 7 inch screen

Perhaps a further factor may have been that the technology was too immature at that time to offer acceptable speed and performance

The decision was then made to 'reset' the project and develop dedicated Mobile Device Systems utilizing consumer Android Devices –Phones and Tablet Computers. Android <https://www.android.com/> was chosen for the Mobile Device Operating System. Android is an open-source Operating System developed by Google – and was selected for the following reasons:

- The Technology is good enough to allow effective Mobile Computing
- Android devices are in everyday use by consumers, and therefore Staff are already familiar with the basic user interfaces involved via their own Phones and Tablet Computers
- The Open Source nature of the Android Operating System eases application development as all source code is available to system developers
- Devices are low/moderate in cost

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The total development cost over 3 years is £1.2 Million – split 1/3 Hardware / 1/3 Software, 1/3 Data Connectivity

User Experience Notes and Observations

It quickly became evident in our conversation with WDH Staff that they were extremely enthusiastic in using the current 500 devices in the field in the form of Tablet Computers and Touch-Screen Phones- and that in large part this was due to Staff involvement at all levels – in specifying, improving and developing the System. It is their System – and it has enabled WDH to almost totally eliminate Paper Form-Filling and back-office data entry.

Debt Management

Debt management is now based on very early intervention and personal visiting – and this only works effectively if the back-end systems supply accurate and timely data to Remote Devices. Remote Working has required a massive cultural change and it's really cost-effective. Our operating costs were reduced 20% overnight, and in the last year a further 10% has been achieved. Activity levels have increased from 3000 activities/week to 7000. This is not all down to mobile – but it has been the key. The system throws out the lowest amount of activity necessary to deal with the situation. For example if a customer owes £30, a text message is appropriate – if hundreds are owed a high level of activity is required. Well trained Debt Management Staff are essential, and they are relatively well-paid, and so need to be Mobile and equipped with the best tools.

All this sounds easy – but to achieve the results so far, has taken a lot of effort - and a high degree of commitment at all levels.

Estate Management

The Estate Manager stated that the initial success of Debt Management had sparked enthusiasm – She had previously gone out on visits to try to understand the problems with the old citrix software running on the Dell Windows 7 Tablets – It was horrible, taking minutes to load screens and clunky in operation – additionally if 3g connection failed the system crashed. We decided that the Estate Management system had to be based around consumer mobile devices – not merely mirror the historical 'desktop' environment, and demanded a dedicated User Interface, as in the Debt Management System. Our Users found the Android Keyboard to be acceptable for updating Diary Notes, entering Text Notes etc. Of course a Desktop / Laptop is best for writing detailed Reports. For this we have Homeworking or Office Hubs. Area Offices have largely gone, measured performance has improved, work/life balance has improved, sickness levels have reduced. I have not been in the central office for a number of weeks – that's not where my work gets done.....

All of this only works if it's done well – with the right tools for the right job.

We would never go back to our old methods of working.

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Homesearch and Allocations

The Allocations/Homesearch Mobile Systems do the complete process –

- Terminations
- Termination Inspections
- Void Listings
- Shortlisting
- Offers
- Signups

This, as with our other Mobile Systems has been developed with extensive involvement by all Staff, and has had the benefits already described. For Example on sign-up I can do proof of income if required, Bank Statements, Photographs – everything on one visit – and by the time I get to my next visit it's all there on the back-office records and a confirmation Tenancy Agreement is processed automatically.

You need to trust people – and if you are used to managing by 'attendance' – it's going to be hard!

Periodic Tenancy Visit

This is the WDH equivalent of Leeds Council's Annual Tenancy Visit

The Periodic Tenancy Visit is carried out using Mobile Devices, and we have all been actively involved in System Specification and Development.

All of the advantages already outlined apply here. We can enter all the required data, scan ID documents, assess house condition, take photographs etc. and the data is available on the Back-Office System by the time we get to the next visit.

The savings in staff time, reduction in sickness levels, increase in job satisfaction that results from the feeling of personal control over your working day – all of these are evident

The Visits are ALWAYS BY APPOINTMENT – literal quote: 'Under Housing Law we have to give our Customers 24 Hours' Notice of a visit'.

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General Comments and Conclusions

The following statements and views stand out for me – and apply to all of WDH’s Mobile Systems - to paraphrase:

‘Not delivered all wrapped and shining and finished – but developed thru hard work and the active – we mean active - involvement of ALL staff’

‘Some resistance is to be expected – not just from users scared of the system – but from management - at all levels - who fear losing the familiar hierarchical control structures’

‘The organisation becomes flatter – more democratic – freer in terms of time – no one has to be tied to an office desk in the morning – a better home/work balance – system changes get done in days or weeks – and ideas can come from everyone’

‘it’s essential to start with a good pilot – deliver early – iterate often – then do it again until it gets good!’

‘Systems at WDH are far from perfect – but for Customers, employees and management Mobile Working has been an overwhelmingly positive development – and Key Performance Indicators – Reduction in Debt, Reducing Voids, Customer Satisfaction, Staff Sickness – all are moving in the right direction – and this has been largely driven by our Mobile Systems’

Web Links

Capita

<http://www.capita.co.uk/>

<http://www.capita-softwareandmanagementservices.co.uk/news/pages/wakefieldanddistricthousinggoestotallymobilewithcapita.aspx>

Total Mobile

<http://totalmobile.co.uk/>

<https://twitter.com/TotalMobile>

<http://totalmobile.co.uk/government>

2013 Video Interview with Geoff Kirk, WDH Management

http://www.capita-softwareandmanagementservices.co.uk/news/Pages/GeoffKirkInterview_Webpage.aspx