Jim Walker brings a new focus to housing systems with DtL

DtL Creative: Helping social landlords deliver excellent systems and solutions.

Jim has been with us at DtL for a number of years now. As we continue to grow and deliver great service throughout our many projects, Jim will also now look at how we get even more efficient in helping landlords implement solutions.

Dave Loudon, founder and MD of DtL Creative asks Jim a few questions on his new role as Director of Consultancy.

Keep checking www.dtl-creative.co.uk for updates on our services, offerings and projects within the Social Housing Sector.

Sustainability is crucial. The team is based across the UK, and we need to be mindful of our carbon footprint but also our sustainability as individuals. Continuing to cross skill, and importantly support each other to deliver the best job we can and deliver the best outcomes for our customers.

Our strengths lie in our vast experiences and we need to bring them to each and every project. We need to continue to bring to our clients prompt, clear, well thought out advice, founded on experience.

What are your thoughts on how housing systems have developed and grown over the years?

Early systems I worked with were very focused on delivering specific business areas or functions. Now they are vast entities, creating endless opportunities but equally the challenges and worry that can go in to whether you're doing the right thing. Systems would be heavily bespoked, but limited by the constraints of the database, the structure, the technology. Now systems are flexible but implementations are limited by the desire to standardise, to take off-the-shelf, to follow the process, to adopt best practice and comply with evolving legislation such as GDPR.

Implementing systems for housing providers is never as straight forward as some think. What do you believe are the biggest challenges?

The biggest challenge is simply to accept that not everything will be perfect first time. As soon as you accept that, decisions and therefore progress can be made much more rapidly.

Often the right people are not available at the right time and those who are in a position to make a decision are nervous about giving something the nod. We need to get past personal biases to work in a specific way, retain control or doing something just because it feels a bit more comfortable.

If you're not sure about a new paint scheme for your living room, you buy a tester pot. This is far less costly than repainting the whole room many times. Clearly, we're not talking Dulux colours, but similarly do a proof of concept.

Run it through end to end, as it will work in production - put your data in, your configuration, produce the letters, run the reports. Pilot the end game as early in the project as possible.

What do you believe is the best way to commission a system? Should there be a big bang approach and do everything at once, or phase it?

One of the biggest constants in IT is the rapid pace of change. We create big well thought out project plans, with appropriate sign-offs, reviews and boards, and managing the process can create more effort than doing the actual 'technical' work required. The problem being that by the time you get to signing off a spec, something else is out there, someone else is doing something well but slightly different, a new version is available. Everyone will recognise projects wain if running for too long, and being seen to fail to deliver. Have a sound strategy, future proof as much as possible, work Agile….but do mini bangs….and as many as possible (within reason of course!) to reap the value as soon as you can.

How important is it for landlords to consider the bigger picture such as their infrastructure, security, interfaces and so on?

A housing system is just one part of a whole network of software, communications, business processes and so a holistic view is important. Draw up the infrastructure on a wall. It doesn't have to comply with ISO9001; my most frequently used and best at conveying understanding have been scribbles on a notepad.

The more the project team understand the bigger picture, the better and quicker the outcomes. Issues such as file transfer; is it ftp, email, or web services? They're not simply words for the integration lead to understand, but dictate things such as how up to date the data is. These are considerations for a Finance Manager, a Rents team and the users.

What typically happens after a system goes live. Is that it done and dusted?

Go-live is when people really start to understand what the solution really does, how it behaves, what things work and how best to approach new requirements. Implementations that are thrown over the fence in to 'Business as Usual' will slowly but surely become outdated, users will have come and gone alongwith their knowledge, and an underused, untrusted, ageing system will soon appear.

At Project kick-offs when looking at outcomes, goals and benefits realisation of the new implementation, its amazing to spot how many things that are being asked for could be done in the systems being replaced but users just don't know how. Go-Live marks the end of the Project, Business as Usual is the ongoing management and support for the live environment, but running alongside that should be a programme of continual review and challenge of what is being done, whether its working, how we can improve, and what's coming up?

And if its not working…change it!