

Software + technology: how to ensure a roaring success

■ Effective property management programs can do the lion's share of your work. By **David Lawson**

PROPERTY MANAGERS ARE NEVER SATISFIED. OFFER them software that would make NASA look like a garden shed operation and they will respond with a frown, a sigh and the inevitable request for one more extra feature. But there still are not too many who start by demanding six impossible tasks before breakfast.

Tracking the maintenance schedules and rent demands on dozens of farms, pubs, homes and commercial properties may be routine for a large estate. Calculating supplies of ice cream, watching the weather forecast, registering visitors and juggling the number of temporary staff would also not shock a theme park.

But handling both business streams is not so simple, particularly if each part of the business has its own accounting software. Even more challenging is ensuring managers have reports that can be checked before they eat their cornflakes each morning.

Along with all that, there always comes 'one more thing' no one might expect to include in a software package. For example, can it keep track of lions and tigers?

Longleat in Wiltshire might seem like a software supplier's nightmare: part-safari park, part-stately home, part-farming, fishery and forestry business. And the complexity does not end there, as it spreads across multiple sites including Cheddar Caves in Somerset.

FIFTY PARTNERSHIP

When the estate tendered for software, it specified a centralised system that covered more than 50 departments and several property ownerships. This needed to provide information for the entire enterprise while maintaining segregation of legal entities. Automated reporting would be crucial to reduce intercompany processing, said David Hines, estate accountant at Longleat.

Such demands must have sent a few software suppliers into hiding, but Hexagon Software Group had a head start. It had already successfully integrated LandMark, one of the best-known property management programs,

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WHAT RELEVANCE HAVE LIONS AND ICE CREAMS to the average manager with perhaps half a dozen properties in deepest suburbia?

Few enterprises will be as complex as Longleat but even the smallest operation can roar with the right mix of software.

Many property management suites include their own financial tools. This is useful if you do not already have any but many firms would rather keep their existing accounting systems than learn something new.

LandMark has the ability to integrate with mainstream software such as Sage or Dream, says James Paul, Hexagon business development manager.

Small firms can also benefit from centralised controls. Paul uses the analogy of a 'one for all' remote control for home entertainment systems. And, at an entry cost of around £10,000, the software is also accessible for smaller businesses.



Mane frame: Longleat's software must stretch to wildlife management

with a central accounting system at Alnwick Castle, part of the Northumberland Estate.

Similarities servicing heritage, tourism and property impressed Longleat but it took more than adding a 'big cat' service to seal the deal. Hexagon had to design and write interfaces for

existing electronic point of sale (EPoS), forestry, payroll and banking packages so data could be imported to the new system (see box).

Changing software normally requires endless hours feeding in data, and every item of information needs validation to ensure there are no errors before updating. The automated interface was built to handle this bulk initial input, as well as day-to-day operations.

Hexagon also helped Longleat make a big improvement in management information. Its desktop module provides on-screen reports so department managers can check income and expenditure with a click of a mouse and bring out the detail behind transactions.

Instead of raising queries after receiving monthly reports, they can see what has been credited or charged to their department on a daily basis. On-screen reports are also an important part of regular finance meetings with managers, as revenue can be compared with previous years.

Income and expenditure can be analysed by ticket type, individual property, costs per staff member and department. Using daily reporting periods on Dream accounting software, managers can compare visitor numbers with the same day for previous years.

Integration with LandMark means that information on outgoings such as repairs can be analysed for each property. Managers can now see this data on screen and have been made more accountable for their own expenditure.

Through LandMark, rent invoices are posted into Dream using the same predefined property code so information is mirrored across management and accounting systems. Paperwork such as invoices are scanned and attached to accounting entries, making it immediately available. Longleat's auditors can log on to the system remotely and analyse data.

Now that all Longleat's demands can be covered before breakfast, the only thing left to worry about is making sure the lions get theirs.

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