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Member's Spotlight
For NCC Focus Member
Keith Isted of Xantus, life
is full of challenges...



User challenges in the New Year

With the focus firmly on 2006, *ITadviser* looks at some key technology challenges facing two NCC member organisations in the New Year.

Carole Nash Insurance

Manchester-based Carole Nash Insurance is gearing up for some major changes to its IT infrastructure during the coming year. As a specialist motorcycle insurance house - it also deals increasingly with car and property insurance - it occupies a unique position in the market. With an established customer base, one of its greatest challenges is to put together the business case for navigating to a more interactive online presence than it currently has. At the same time, the company's Misys back office systems are being prepared for a major migration to a non-proprietary platform which will see 30 of the 70+ Intel servers consolidated onto six blade servers, improving the flow of automated processes and removing the dependency upon redundant equipment. As Head of IT Les Boggia explains, with up to 90 individual projects underway and commanding the full might of his 26-strong department, 2006 will be an exciting year - if not one for the faint-hearted.

'As far as our existing web presence is concerned, our plan is to enable quotes and renewals to be converted within a new online sales solution. At the moment, we have a limited website, mainly a marketing and information portal rather than providing a full customer interactive system. Currently if you are directed to the Carole Nash website for a quote, the customer will have to make a phone call in to the call centre. Of course, if this is out of hours, and our call centre is closed, then the customer may turn to an alternative provider who can trade online. Whilst already heavily committed to the development of this solution, we are still assessing our customers to determine whether or not the internet is a viable option. We are certainly not complacent, however, we are well known throughout the bike world with one in three motorcycles in the UK insured with us. We pride ourselves on our quality of service - and after 20 years, the majority of our customers stay with us. Online quotes and renewals may not be a must-have for them. At the same time, we're looking at extending our other areas of business - cars, home and commercial insurance. So the conundrum is how we market our online presence to ensure we are providing what our customers actually want. That's what the business is facing up to and it drives the IT challenge back into the heart of the operation with a basic question: how does our customer profile suit the web?



Because of our legacy proprietary back office system, it was previously very difficult to think about a way to overlay a web-based access system. So in 2005 we signed a major contract with Misys to have a dedicated team at its Worcester premises, working on a new system for us that will handle ad hoc requests, renewals processing and have online capability. Also at the start of the year, we recruited nine additional staff to our in-house IT department. We recognised how important it was to get things quicker and closer to Misys' strategy. Between us we've been working to emulate the system on a Linux box and separate out the core database. The next step is to get the XML interface in place so that the quote can be fed to the customer and converted to a sale via the back office.

All of these separate projects are inter-dependent. It's very exciting, but it's also daunting! We didn't want to purchase more servers, so the whole project also rests on server consolidation and restructuring our network. At the time of speaking, we've been working towards a live date of September 2006 for online sales. But meanwhile, Misys has been developing the next version of its software, so we've had to schedule an upgrade over Christmas which will have a knock-on effect on development of the online system. At the same time, because Carole Nash has moved more into EDI-based brokering, we also have to update our renewals system by March. Our job in IT is to juggle a whole series of 'what if?' questions.

It's a massive project of great technical complexity that has to be justified by the business plan, but there are some intangible aspects that are hard to measure. We don't know how much, if any, business we're losing because a customer can't get a quote from us online in the evening. It's possible that our brand carries itself. We don't know how much of the business will transfer to online renewals. It isn't like the 'olden days' of early e-commerce when you would measure success in the volume of the online business.

For us on the IT side, it's quite an emotional process. We get day-to-day requests and the business side has responded well to our handing the challenge back to them. But it's also exciting for me and the team because we're looking at implementing new technology to underpin the business for the future, including networks, telephony, blade servers and virtualisation.'

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority



Strategy, explains, the project forms the platform for an exciting new phase in the QCA's interaction with both the awarding organisations and the end-users: the students at every stage of their education who need access to information that will help them make key decisions about their future.

'Following the 2002 accreditation review, a Word-based application form was introduced to reduce the average processing time from 48 weeks to around eight weeks. Despite the reduced timescale, each completed form with supporting attachments consisted of some 21 pages, and consequently a decision was taken to develop a secure web-based system that would allow awarding bodies to submit qualifications more quickly and efficiently. This decision and the resulting project received active support from QCA's partner bodies in both Wales (ACCAC) and Northern Ireland (CCEA).



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Weekly Poll

According to Gartner, CRM projects are high on firms' 2006 agendas with businesses starting to implement large company-wide solutions with business-led strategies.

Do you agree that company-wide CRM projects are now moving up the business agenda?

Yes

No

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reveals that 66% of
firms expect to adopt OS

Work commenced on the new system in late 2004, and required the development of a close working partnership between the QCA business unit and its IT organisation. The inclusion of external resources and the use of a new set of technologies (C# & .Net) resulted in the trial adoption of an iterative approach. This proved to be as steep a learning curve for the business unit as for the IT organisation, but was so successful that QCA's Information Systems Programme Leader, Nikki Greenway, is now heading up an RUP adoption programme across the business analysis and IS functions.

The long term aim of the project was not just to enable awarding organisations to submit their qualifications more efficiently, but also to capture data to enable reports to be generated online and shared among interested parties. For example, it will facilitate the publishing of information that will help school and college leavers make important choices, such as planning their progression routes from GCSEs to other qualifications or possible job options, and eventually QCA hopes to be able to provide linked information about colleges and locations where their desired qualification is available.

In May 2005, QCA launched its 5-day fast-track accreditation process for those awarding bodies that could prove they have robust arrangements for developing qualifications, a good track record, and would benefit from a simpler, less bureaucratic process. These online applications comprise just five short sections, and should be processed within QCA within five working days: a 91 per cent time reduction compared with three years ago.

The awarding body response has been very positive. One of the five that have already gained access to the process said the system was possibly the most important QCA development for qualification accreditation during the last ten years. Submissions can be reviewed online, with rapid feedback for the awarding bodies and consequently they can respond quickly to market signals and receive accreditations in record time. Demand for qualifications is also expected to rise as the information becomes more readily and widely available, and new qualifications will emerge in response to employer demand.

QCA anticipates that by the end of 2006 most of the 115 awarding bodies will have moved across to the new 5-day process. Meanwhile, they can use the online system that was launched this November, increasing their own and QCA's administrative efficiency and reducing the standard accreditation time by up to a maximum of three weeks. It has been a radical transformation, reducing multiple versions of 10 different submission forms consisting of multiple pages to just four screens. Whilst the underlying accreditation process remains necessarily complex, the online system built to support it has been made extremely simple.

An analysis of ROI and business value achievement will be undertaken in due course. As a result of the initial rollout, QCA expects 90 per cent of submissions under the 5-day process to be accredited within one day, and qualifications submitted under the standard procedure to be accredited within 15 working days.

New functionality will be released over the coming months, including an extended scope of qualification types. It is also hoped that the system be adopted by its partner body in Scotland, SQA and the Scottish awarding bodies.'

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Categories: Special Feature, IT adviser, Business and IT



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