

Case Study #15 –

CUSTOMER SERVICE DIRECT (SUFFOLK COUNTY, UK)

Note: The managers of Customer Service Direct felt unable to provide information for this case study on the grounds that “Customer Service Direct is a Limited company” and that “much of the information” requested for the case study “is confidential.” This case study is based solely on material available on the Web.

1. Background

Almost 680,000 people live in Suffolk, many of them in rural areas. They receive a wide range of services from two tiers of local government. The first tier is the County Council, which delivers services to customers throughout the area. The second tier, represented in Suffolk by five District Councils and two Borough Councils, delivers a separate array of services to geographically defined subsets within the County’s overall population.

Long-standing public confusion over demarcation lines between the responsibilities of these two tiers of local government had affected the efficiency of service delivery across the board. Customers often contacted County Council officials about issues that were part of a District Council’s responsibility, and vice versa, causing frustration and delay. Depending on the type of enquiry, members of the public were frequently passed between several departments or from one council to the next. In addition, a proliferation of red tape made it difficult for local council staff to work effectively and efficiently, wasting both time and money.

In 2000, the functioning of the two-tier system was reviewed in the light of an emerging e-government agenda – later formalized in the 2004 Gershon Report, an efficiency initiative of the UK central government that required local authorities to make year-on-year savings. Mid Suffolk District Council, in particular, wanted to explore options for improving service delivery. With three-quarters of its 87,000-strong population living in villages of less than 500, some lacking a bus service, seeing council representatives to resolve problems was often difficult. Thus this District Council joined forces with the County Council to carry out a joint assessment, and sought to broaden the process to involve all seven of the Suffolk local authorities. Faced with the daunting task of offering an e-enabled “joined up” service to citizens by 2005, the Suffolk County and Mid Suffolk District Councils embraced an ambitious program to re-engineer their organizations and transform the way they delivered services to Suffolk’s citizens. This would also ensure that both Suffolk County Council and Mid Suffolk District Council achieved the central government’s aim for all services to be e-enabled by 2005.

The two Councils examined the technology requirements of seamless service provision through an integrated local government network using walk-in centres, phone lines and a public-facing website. A customer-focused, easily accessible and high quality service for both individuals and businesses was Suffolk’s number-one objective. To achieve this,

Suffolk County Council and Mid Suffolk District Council determined that they needed to adopt a “one-stop-shop” approach, joining up county and district services and enabling citizens to access council services across multiple channels - on the Internet, by telephone or over the counter.

On June 1, 2004 a new company, Customer Service Direct (CSD) Limited, was created, with 600 staff running networked IT services for 27,500 internal customers and 680,000 residents. CSD was a partnership between Suffolk County Council, Mid Suffolk District Council and British Telecommunications (BT). Knowing they had to deliver real efficiency savings, the councils seized the opportunity to exploit the latest IT innovations. Market testing was carried out on making the conventional two-tier system more transparent, and BT won a ten-year contract to transform the County and District Councils’ service provision. The first major milestone was achieved with the opening of the Stowmarket customer service centre in Mid Suffolk. This comprises a 6-station area for face-to-face contact on the ground floor and a 30-seat call centre above for telephone and Internet enquiries.

2. Organizational Design and Governance Arrangements

As noted, CSD is a public-private partnership between Suffolk County Council, Mid Suffolk District Council and BT. BT’s partner throughout the project was CGI Group, a Canadian company specializing in information technology and business process services. Twenty-five CGI staff worked on site, managing the cultural shift towards a customer-centric service.

3. Business Model

3(a) Activities, Channels and Migration

Customer Service Direct gives local people access to county and district council services from a single point of contact. It has opened three walk-in centres - in Stowmarket, Needham Market and Eye - and has established a telephone contact service and a transactional web site. Residents and businesses can access over 400 services and no longer need to know which council provides the service they need.

Front-line agents use BT’s Contact Central – an eCommunity Relationship Management (eCRM) solution. Contact Central tracks individual enquiries and provides enhanced service, with more than 80 per cent of public queries resolved at first contact compared to 60 per cent previously. The use of voice over IP (VoIP) is providing further integration benefits, and is expected to result in significant cost savings and service enhancements.

An enhanced website allows residents to log queries, complete transactions, or view detailed information or advice on births, council tax, housing and transport. From the agents’ side, the website offers prompts and suggestions to help agents handle enquiries. Online information can be called up during enquiries with reference numbers allocated to each customer query enabling quick retrieval. A web-enablement tool, gBIZ

from CGI, acts as a real time interface between agents' computer terminals and back office systems, including key customer databases. This ensured that the web-based capabilities of Contact Central could interact with legacy systems seamlessly.

3(b) and 3(c) Funding and Human Resource Issues

While committing itself to a £50 million investment during the ten-year lifetime of the contract, BT has delivered business process re-engineering, change management and training – as well as career development opportunities for council staff.

3(d) Performance Measurement

No information available.

3(e) Use of Information Technology

In order to achieve the far-reaching changes required to the way that the councils worked and interacted with their customers, an early focus was on implementing a networked IT services infrastructure. The BT metroVPN service – creating a managed regional IP-based virtual private network – was selected as the convergence platform for the Suffolk partnership. Built upon Cisco Systems multi-protocol label switching (MPLS) technology, metroVPN offers Class of Service (CoS) functionality to enable critical voice traffic to share the network with data that does not require such high priority treatment. In fact, voice over IP (VoIP) 'islands' have been created, notably in the councils' headquarters. In addition, using the network, an integrated multi-channel contact centre is integrated with back office systems and processes. This involved revamping the councils' existing LAN and WAN services and enabling front-end access to back office operations through the gBIZ web-enabling tool mentioned earlier.

These improvements were introduced in conjunction with BT's Contact Central technology, which also utilizes the converged metroVPN IP infrastructure. Contact Central is as an end-to-end CRM solution that allows voice calls, faxes and emails to be routed through to agents – with immediate visibility of customer information – in a virtual contact centre. The system enables fine-tuning of routing strategies, and can be fully integrated with existing systems to ensure access from any part of the network.

3(f) Partnerships

As noted, CSD is a public-private partnership between Suffolk County Council, Mid Suffolk District Council and BT. In turn, BT partnered with CGI because of its pioneering single-window government approach. The councils were particularly impressed with CGI's track record for innovative working with government, highlighted by its work with Service New Brunswick in Canada.

4. Community Engagement

Not Applicable.

5. Issues Encountered/Challenges

No information available.

6. Critical Success Factors

Providing a Single Point of Contact. Through the first CSD centre in Stowmarket, the Suffolk Councils have achieved a one-stop-shop for all council services. For example, a citizen wishing to make a complaint about a litter problem may previously have been re-routed through several local authorities in the quest to identify whether the responsibility was a council, borough or district matter. The new system ensures any complaint – no matter whose area of responsibility – can be dealt with immediately, at the first point of contact. In addition, during the same call the citizen could then make an enquiry regarding payment of council tax, for example, which would be dealt with by the same call centre operative.

Providing Specially Trained Staff. Around 100 people visit the centre each day for help, advice and information about a wide range of services: from making payments, or reporting problems to obtaining information about everything from refuse collection to transport. The specially trained staff also handle around 300 calls each day. All services have been realigned to meet citizens' needs and expectations.

Freeing Up Resources. It is not only the public in Suffolk who are benefitting from the single-window approach, but also local businesses, Council workers and the councils themselves. CGI's single-window approach is much more efficient, allowing savings to be reinvested in order to deliver even richer services. Routine activities, such as paying council tax, can now be carried out online, freeing up local council staff's time and allowing them to concentrate on resolving the more pressing issues troubling Suffolk's citizens and businesses. This, in turn, will increase council workers' job satisfaction, as insufficient tools and technology will no longer prohibit them from doing their jobs to their best ability. CSD has helped both the Suffolk County and Mid Suffolk District Councils to reach the top of local authority efficiency league tables.

Changing the Culture. Cultural transformation played a winning role in supporting the new technology processes. Key to changing attitudes to service delivery was the management of the cultural shift for staff that they were now delivering a customer-centric service. It was vital that this cultural transformation – which puts the customer at the centre of the councils' business processes – be effectively communicated, to ensure that all staff embraced the new working practices supported by the 'one-stop-shop' technology. Attitudes to service delivery have changed dramatically and the opening of the Stowmarket centre provided staff with a huge morale boost.

7. Next Steps

Information not available.

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