

IT – the key to unlocking big savings



A ‘back to basics’ review of IT provision could be the answer when times are hard, says Simon Bailey ■

Save money, save money, save money. It’s nothing new. For many years, local authorities have been constantly looking to reduce spending across the board. The Labour government looked to reduce spending by 3% year-on-year, mainly by the use of IT and back-office integration. Whether the savings ever came about is dubious, with the recent report of the **Public Accounts Committee** finding that for every seven pounds of promised savings only one pound was delivered.

But times were different then – 3% savings were not backed up with actual reductions in government grants. This time, with the recently announced spending review, the actual savings have to be found.

With 70% to 80% of revenues and benefits budgets being salaries, it’s not hard to see where the savings are going to be made. However, reducing staff is not the best option, as it will lead to valuable skills being lost, as well as the knowledge staff carry with them in their day-to-day jobs. The alternative is to look where things can be automated as much as possible, thus freeing up staff, so they can bring added value and make the service more efficient. Removing poor processes and procedures will allow staff to perhaps collect more money, pay benefits quicker, reduce overpayments and move into areas where income can be increased.

IT has a major enabling role in creating efficiencies. When used properly, IT can really turn the service from good to excellent, and reduce costs in the process.

Working with lots of authorities over many years, I have seen many procedures and processes that don’t need to be within the service. I’ve also witnessed times when expensive software systems are used badly, or not utilised to their best.

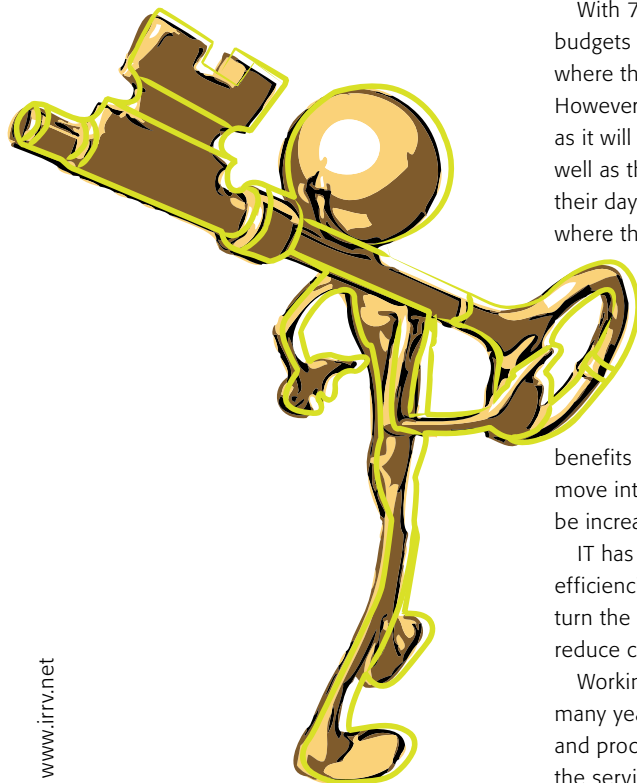
Core systems such as your billing or benefits IT product are often implemented

for a reason. This could be because of new legislation, legacy systems becoming out of date, or perhaps because of shared services. Often, there is great relief and jubilation when the system goes live, provided the system as it stands is as good as or better than the legacy system. Whether the system is developed further will often depend upon the individuals and management within the service. It’s a bit like getting a brand-new DVD recorder home – you plug it in, press play, press record and you are happy with the product because it’s doing what you thought it would. However, the DVD player has many more functions that could be utilised to make the use of the product even better.

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So how do you know if you’re making the best use of your core system? One of the simplest ways is to ask your system supplier to undertake a review of the system and its use. However the supplier may charge for this service, and if you’re looking to save money then the last thing you want is to have to pay for such a report. Although there is a philosophy of ‘spend to save’, where £2000 spent may save £20,000, a good business case will still be required.

User groups and **other authorities** may also be a source of information as to how the system may be improved. Staff are sometimes appointed from other authorities with the same system. These staff should be consulted and listened to. Very often they will have ideas and experience from their previous authority



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as to how that system could be used better.

RTFM is an acronym for 'read the flippin' manual'. On many occasions I have gone to authorities where I am not knowledgeable on the systems they use. Two hours spent reading through the setup and user manual of the system can bring substantial rewards. Also, make sure it's the latest manual, and not five years out of date!

Often within the manual you will find programs or options that can be run that will reduce or eradicate manual and time-consuming processes undertaken by staff. As an example, one authority was inputting returned single person discount forms, which had been scanned and indexed onto their document management system. A quick bit of programming and a file was produced of reference numbers from the document management system of returned forms. The system had an interface to take that file, and update the accounts automatically. Hey presto – days of manual input removed at a stroke.

Document management systems are another area which, when used properly can help a service to increase its efficiency. Again, very often the implementation of such systems is to aim to go live with the basics. More complex modules within the system are left to be implemented at a later time when 'things are a little quieter', and I'm sure we would all agree that things never get a 'little quieter'!

A good example of this is the **reporting modules** within document management systems. Often, these are not used as they may require additional training, which in turn requires finance. But this is one area, if you are going to measure performance and gain efficiencies, for which there is a definite need.

The reporting module will let you know how much work is being done, and what is outstanding at the touch of a button. I have seen managers and team leaders not using the reporting mechanisms, but manually adding up

the items in staff trays or work queues. Ten to twenty minutes work is replaced by a fifteen second report.

Are your staff still working from paper lists? Again, most document management systems will import these lists in digital format, and they can be distributed as work items to staff. Always let the document management system do what it is supposed to do, i.e. to manage the documentation and correspondence you generate or receive. This may seem obvious, but it doesn't always happen. Those running the systems need to talk to those using them. I'm sure in the majority of authorities this happens – however, I have seen some where it doesn't.

Recently, I have worked with staff on improvement projects – a team was created consisting of several types of individuals, looking at the working methods to see if they could be improved. The team comprised a cross-section of managers, team leaders, assessors and frontline staff. What was important was that the officers responsible for the system administration were also included. What became evident was that there were substantial, quick wins that could be gained by utilising the technology already in place.

These were identified by simply sitting down and talking through the issues. I'm not saying it's a panacea, but it allowed for the 'techies' to understand the coalface issues, and this should help to develop the core and document management systems to provide a better and more efficient service.

One authority I worked in actually made staff sit an IT test. The test measured their skills in Microsoft Office products such as Excel, Word and PowerPoint, etc. The content of the tests varied depending upon the role of the officer. However, one of the key areas for everybody was typing speed – this is so logical that is often overlooked. Most staff sit in front of a PC using the keyboard to interface with the machine, and their speed of typing must have an impact on efficiency. If I remember rightly, training on typing was given when required. This is another example of where it is not just having the technology that is important, but whether it is used effectively and efficiently.

It's not just the main systems which could be improved upon. **Multifunctional devices** (MFDs) have become the norm in revenues and benefits offices. These photocopiers, scanners, e-mailers and fax machines do everything apart from make the tea. They are often part of a corporate roll-out, and in some instances, due to lack of training or information, they are not used effectively. Often they are leased, and there are a set number of training days provided within the cost of the lease. It's worth looking to see whether these MFDs could be used more efficiently.

The next few years are going to be tough for revenues and benefits sections up and down the country. It's my view that there are efficiencies and savings to be made, and IT is the key to unlocking them. It's not all about spending more money on new kit and new IT – it's about using what is already there, but in a more efficient way.

