

HARNESSING IT

INTERVIEWS

Nick Russell

DIRECTOR



THOMASONS

Taylor Made
COMPUTER SOLUTIONS

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In a series of interviews with Taylor Made Computer Solutions, directors reveal what they perceive to be the issues if IT is to deliver key objectives.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.

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OVER-RELIANCE ON computers can lead to problems that wouldn't happen otherwise, opines Nick Russell, director of independent, multi-disciplinary civil and structural engineering practice Thomasons.

Though engineers need computers to manipulate the numbers involved in complex building projects, this can stifle creativity. We need to combine that with technical acumen and common sense too, he says.

"I spend a lot of time explaining to people that computers can't think for you; they can only tell you things based on what you put in. We should use computers to validate what we think the answers should be, but we shouldn't let the computer tell us what to do. You should rely to a certain extent on instinct and experience for direction. If something looks wrong, it probably is."

The key, he believes, is to "use the best parts of technology to the best effect and not let it grind you down." Which it can. One of his frustrations is upgrades. "Windows 10," he recalls, "gave us things we had to get used to but at the end of the day did exactly what we had before - and we had to pay for that."

On the other hand, IT enables the company to process large amounts of data to allow it to take appropriate decisions. "It takes out repetitive actions and allows our people to do far more interesting and creative things," says Russell. For example, documents can be scanned, recognised,

and filed in the correct place by the system.

IT also enables procurement pricing to be done more accurately on the firm's projects, which range from private homes and housing developments to retail parks, town centre regenerations and major hospital redevelopments. That enables the cost of certain items to be changed and for the effect on the overall pricing to be easily seen. "It takes the drudgery out, and gives you the opportunity to think about things rather than spending all your time writing out numbers," comments Russell. "The same with budgets. We can immediately see the effect if something in particular happens.

"We are involved frequently on schemes which require changes to site levels for example, and we have a program to work out the details of the most cost-effective way to remove the earth and put it somewhere else. We used to use a lot of complicated calculations but now we can do it almost at the touch of a button and arrive at a far more accurate answer."

IT also frees up engineers to focus on the more complex parts of projects. "Specialist subcontractors often carry out engineering on projects and IT enables us to integrate their details with our own," Russell explains. "For example, a

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fabricator can design a steel-framed industrial type building, and that makes sense in that they're doing it all day, every day, and can detail it to best suit the resources that they have. The electronic model however can be transferred to our own system and integrate with the parts of the project that we are working on."

The big plus of IT in this context is that it gives people time to innovate and research better ways of doing "the stuff that good engineers do".

Up-grading computer aided design and building information modelling [BIM] to 3D was expensive but necessary, muses Russell. "The logic is that you have to give clients what they want, to achieve their aspirations. You can't go to the client and say 'here is a picture of the building'.

"They now quite rightly expect to see an electronic model that can be viewed from every angle and know what it will look like from the inside. We have to know much more about the work of the client, too. We are not just engineers. With our major retail clients for example, we even know what their trading patterns are, which stores are busiest at what times of the year."

The company is now looking at virtual reality, which will allow the client to put on a pair of goggles and

'walk' through a building. Russell observes: "For architects, VR is a must have, but for us it's a nice to have. It's a way off yet, a lot of work has to be done, but we will have some version of it. For now, it's better to have a computer generated model that's accurate than a glitzy system that isn't."

Established in 1947, Thomasons always invested heavily in IT. "We were one of the first firms to invest in a fax machine," Russell recalls. "When I bought my first computer I thought a 160k hard drive would last for ever. We've also aspired to buy the best infrastructure available at the time, to ensure the best connectivity. Two years ago, we bought 100Mb cables that were not even standard yet. Now they are!"

But they don't try to be too ahead of the curve. "We are happy to consider ideas presented by staff who have the vision to do something differently. There is a huge energy that is driven by our younger staff members and graduates. But many things that we have considered, for example Apps, are only of use if there is a client requirement or if it is useful to the profession as a whole.

"There's no point being too far in front of the curve as you can make expensive mistakes. We need to stand a little bit back but be alive to the things that IT can do.

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“It’s making IT work for you. There are tremendous opportunities, some of them simple things like improving spreadsheet templates or finding ways of filing emails more efficiently. We need to make use of the bits that are useful but avoid the bits we don’t need.”

Which is a reason why Thomasons have outsourced their IT services. “We realised long ago that a firm of our size couldn’t keep on top of IT left to our own devices, so we outsourced it; not just the nuts and bolts but also to ‘inform’ our strategy. For example do we use the cloud or not, do we buy hardware or lease it, do we have a central server or a hybrid system?”

Comparatively little is cloud based at the moment except for the accounting system and the ability to share information and collaborate with fellow professionals. There is a server in each of the eight offices around the country. The servers back up to each other via high-capacity data lines.

Russell accepts that the cloud is becoming cheaper to use but he’s worried about putting too much up there. He likens what he considers could be potential problems to “people who build boats in their garden and then find they can’t get them out.”

One area of investment is buying the best firewall and security systems. But even they can’t prevent human error. “People will still open scam emails, which is often contrary to common sense,” says Russell. “You know you don’t have family visiting Africa and you know that the HMRC doesn’t really send tax refund notifications by email but people still open these things.”

And scammers have started using the phone too. “We nearly got caught out once,” recalls Russell.

“I had just got back from somewhere and the finance manager popped in and said ‘oh, you’re here!’ Someone had just rung, pretending to be me, asking for £11,000 to be transferred. We now have a rule that we don’t process payments unless the director concerned is there in the office.”

But the very nature of technology lends itself to making scamming the art of the possible. Requests for payment are rarely genuinely urgent, says Russell, “but technology makes everything seem so immediate. People think they have to respond straight away, and they don’t. We should allow IT to work for us but not let it take over. How can you tell if that is happening in an organisation? One of the signs is that people aren’t talking to each other so much.”

He cites the increased use of social media. “The millennial generation doesn’t even email any more; WhatsApp, LinkedIn and Facebook and others are now the norm. I know we have to do it but the problem is it takes away human contact.

“I use emails for passing on information but I much prefer to deal with issues by picking up the phone and talking to the person concerned. If somebody emails me internally about something mundane I won’t reply. I can guarantee that eventually – usually within minutes - they will come to see me, saying did you get my e-mail?”

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I N T E R V I E W S



Established in 1994, Taylor Made Computer Solutions are one of the largest and most highly-ranked IT service and support organisations in the south, currently employing over 110 staff.

Taylor Made are the first technology company in the region to have gained a third consecutive gold award from Investors in People. Taylor Made are also ISO 9001:2008 certified.

The company has been ranked in the top 10 managed service providers in Europe the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) in a leading annual industry survey from MSPmentor since 2012.

Taylor Made are a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, HP Preferred Partner and a NetApp Silver Partner.

Services include:

IT support, IT strategy, IT consultancy, hosted telephony, project management, Securo online back-up, hosted solutions, remote management and monitoring, cloud solutions, disaster recovery, remote access, outsource engineering, security, service desk support.

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