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PROFILE

Organisation: **Parasol Ltd.**
 Interviewee: **Sharon Hughes.**
 Job Title: **Business Systems Manager.**
 The Subject: **Parasol has implemented new financial, payroll and CRM systems to fully automate its business processes, and improve its efficiency, scalability and cost management.**

Q: WHAT MADE YOU REPLACE YOUR FINANCIAL SYSTEM?

A: Parasol was set up in 2000 primarily to support contractors working in the UK. The aim was to develop a fully compliant way of working for contractors that satisfied all the government legislation, ensured they paid the appropriate levels of tax and national insurance, and that they were fully insured.

After going through a management buyout in 2006, we had reached a point where we wanted to take the company to the next level and grow our contractor base significantly. Up to this time most of our systems had been built inhouse, but with the existing platforms and software we had it would be impossible to achieve the levels of automation that would allow the business to grow cost effectively.

Q: HOW DID YOU SELECT THE NEW PRODUCTS?

A: At that point we went out to the market to identify which software vendors could provide suitable applications to fully automate the entire business.

After evaluating a number of companies we selected Access as offering the best all-round solution for our requirements based on functionality, cost and speed of implementation. We opted for Access Dimensions finance system, Access Payroll and Goldmine CRM.

We also had a front-end web portal, which we had developed, to enable our contractors to log in and submit their timesheets and expenses. All of the new systems needed to be integrated with this so that when a timesheet was input, it could be pulled straight through into the back-office systems and the agency invoiced.

Q: HOW DID THE SYSTEM IMPLEMENTATION PROCEED?

A: We had a really tight timescale to get the software installed as it had to be done by the completion of the management buyout. This

meant we had about five to six months to replace all of our back-office systems and integrate them with our web portal.

We formed a project team of about five people to implement all the applications and Access provided people to support us. Access were brilliant during the whole implementation phase and we have built up an incredibly good working relationship with them that continues to this day.

We decided to migrate as little data as possible across to the new systems and just bring over what we really needed. We also chose to do that at the

beginning of the financial year so that we had fewer records to take over.

We had a number of teething issues – largely due to our aggressive timescales – and it took about four months for everything to completely settle down. But once it had, it delivered all the benefits we were seeking and we have continued to enhance how we use the system since then.

Our own IT people provide first-line support on all the applications but we actually get very few support calls. In most cases it is more about, can we change this or can we add this. We do a lot of amendments

ORGANISATION FILE

Parasol was founded by former IT contractor Rob Crossland and formally launched in 2000. It rapidly built a healthy base of contractor employees, largely by developing partnerships with the recruitment agencies that place them. Now in its 11th year, it has looked after the needs of some 35,000 contractors and this figure continues to increase as the company expands into new market sectors across the UK.

In November 2006 Crossland led an MBO of Parasol, backed by the private equity firm, Inflexion. Parasol has achieved tremendous average annual growth of 280% and now boasts a turnover in excess of £300 million. The company employs over 100 staff at its head office in Warrington, Cheshire and has recently established a regional sales office in London with a further regional sales presence in Scotland.

In 2009, ever looking for more opportunities, ClearSky Accounting (the new name for Quay Accounting) was brought into the Parasol Family. The buyout is the first of several planned strategic acquisitions in Parasol's ambition to become one of the biggest contractor service providers in Europe, and sees the start of the company's development into a 'one stop shop', where all of a contractor's career requirements will be met from first job through to retirement.

Parasol has achieved a large number of business awards and accolades over recent years: ISO9001; 2010, 2008, 2006 and 2005 *Sunday Times Fast Track 100*; 2008 and 2006 *Sunday Times Top Track 250*; 2007, 2008, 2010 *Best Companies award*; and *Investors in People award*, as well as receiving the 2007 and 2005 *ATSCo Staffing Service Provider of the Year award* for its excellent customer care.

ourselves but there are certain elements – as we don't own the source code – we have to get Access to do for us. They work very well with us and help us figure out the best way of doing things.

We have now gone through a number of upgrades, and try and simplify the operation each time. Since the original implementation we have added an HR system, SelectHR, which is integrated into the payroll system.

Q: HAVE YOU INTEGRATED THE SYSTEM WITH ANY OTHER SOFTWARE?

A: We tightly integrated all the Access applications – Dimensions, Payroll and Goldmine – with our front-end web portal, which was built inhouse. This enables new contractors to register with us, and existing contractors to submit their timesheets and expenses.

When a contractor registers with us, we perform a lot of upfront checks on our website, and this information is stored directly into our back-office systems before we offer them a contract of employment and make their assignment available. When someone accepts an assignment, we will ask them exactly what they will be doing so that we can validate that we can insure that role or get additional insurance if we need to.

We also do ID verification, so we have bolted it into ID software to streamline that process and check eligibility to work in the UK. We try and do as much of this work online as possible.

When you register online, a record is automatically created for you in Goldmine so that all our customer service people can see all of the details you have entered – who you are, where you live, what assignments you have got, what rates you are getting, what timesheets you have put in, etc. Goldmine will then transparently push the information into payroll and create a payroll record as well.



PERSONAL FILE

NAME: Sharon Hughes.

BACKGROUND: Sharon has a highly successful background in business systems and change management, taking the lead role on a number of change programmes for some of the UK's leading brands and companies.

In 2000, Sharon was responsible for leading retailer Dixon's customer services and helpdesk teams, before moving to the IT team in order to head up a project that saw the white goods specialist completely replace all of its business systems, after which she was awarded the role of business systems manager.

Sharon joined Parasol in 2007 – a critical time for the company – and has successfully overseen a number of systems changes and upgrades. She is now integral to the organisation as it gears up for new legislation that will affect the recruitment and staffing industry this autumn.

This makes the whole process completely transparent and hugely efficient.

For a business of this size we have two people processing payroll, that's the main thing Parasol does, and that's because the contractors are entering their own data, and as all the systems are so highly integrated and efficient it just means that we do not have to enter a lot of information manually to service our employees.

Q: WHAT FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS ARE YOU PLANNING?

A: The next steps are to upgrade the Goldmine CRM system to the latest version as we need more capability for pipeline management and social media.

A lot of focus at the moment is on a project to make changes

to the Access Dimensions system to accommodate new legislation. We are working very closely with Access on this; they are doing elements of it but a lot of it we will be doing.

We have recently launched a new product called Silverline, which is a cloud-based product we are selling to recruitment agencies. It extracts data from an agency's database and displays it in a user-friendly way so they can quickly view relevant information on their business. So it really provides an effective sales tool to the agency.

Q: WHAT ARE THE MAJOR BENEFITS YOU HAVE SEEN FROM THE SYSTEM?

A: From a cost management perspective it has been hugely successful and the efficiency of the company has improved

greatly. We have been able to keep the same number of heads of staff and significantly increase the size of our contractor base. So that is a big win for us.

We are able to interrogate our contractor base more effectively, and as the data we hold is much improved we can understand their requirements better, and what products and services are appropriate to them. So it has made marketing to them a lot easier.

The on-boarding process is also much easier; we have significantly improved the dropout rate during the registration process and our retention rate is also much better.

But really the main benefits are around efficiency, scalability and reducing the costs of processing, which have allowed us to grow the business to the next level.

Q: IS THERE ANY ADVICE YOU WOULD GIVE TO OTHERS CONTEMPLATING A SIMILAR SYSTEM?

A: The challenge every business faces when they are ripping out old systems and putting in new ones is that, although your end users may have hated your old system, they still want to make the new one look remarkably like the old one, with all the customisations they previously had. You have to be quite strong not to simply recreate what you had before.

You need to understand what it is you really want, and marry this together with the capability of the new system and not reinvent the wheel. Also make sure your internal people are fully trained on the new software before you start the implementation; the more they know about it, the more effective they can be in implementing its full range of capabilities.

Finally, you should engage fully with the business who will be using it and test the software extensively until you are sure it delivers everything you expected.