

Records Management for field based staff at the Royal Parks Agency



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Introduction

Along with all other government departments and agencies, the Royal Parks Agency is required to comply with the government's electronic targets and of course with the Freedom of Information Act. To this end, the Parks selected TRIM Context from Tower Software as their ERMS and, following competitive tender, chose Audata to carry out the implementation. RPA managers had seen a presentation on the TRIM Context system which Audata had installed at the National Maritime Museum. There were many similarities between the two organisations in terms of their location, size and relationships to the public. One significant difference is that many Parks staff are not based in an office, but spend much of their time actually working in the Parks themselves.

This article discusses some of the experiences gained during the implementation of an ERMS in an organisation where most of their staff are field based and not heavily computer oriented.

About the Royal Parks

The Royal Parks is an executive agency of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). They look after:

- Bushy Park (with the Longford River),
- The Green Park,
- Greenwich Park,
- Hyde Park,
- Kensington Gardens,
- The Regent's Park (with Primrose Hill),
- Richmond Park and
- St James's Park.

The Royal Parks also tend a number of other spaces in London, including Brompton Cemetery, the gardens of 10, 11 and 12 Downing Street, and Grosvenor Square Gardens.



Richmond Park in springtime

The Royal Parks carries out the day to day management of these spaces and (almost!) everything in them as well as conserving the Parks to ensure future generations can enjoy them. The 5,000

acres of historic parkland provide unparalleled opportunities for enjoyment, exploration and healthy living in the heart of the capital. A simple walk or a picnic in the park; sport; top quality entertainment; community and education projects are all available. If it's history and architecture you're after, the Parks have hundreds of buildings, statues, and memorials, giving a fascinating insight into London's heritage.



A pond in Richmond Park

Keeping so much parkland stocked with trees and other plants is no small task and the Royal Parks has its own nursery to meet the demand. A dedicated team of horticulturists, plantsmen, gamekeepers and other Parks staff totalling around 150 people work to keep the Parks looking great all year round. The Royal Parks puts sustainability at the heart of its management practices, for which it has gained ISO 14001 accreditation. There is a "Green Housekeeping Committee", to keep performance in this area under

constant review. The Royal Parks also has an Ecology Officer to advise on habitat management, sustainability, and biodiversity.

Project start up

The project to implement TRIM within the Parks began in late June of 2004 with a Project Kick Off Meeting. The scope was agreed and a Project Plan written. The late start date meant that the project had to follow a rapid implementation plan in order to meet the end of year deadlines. Where normally a pilot implementation and subsequent evaluation would be used, the Parks had to adopt a 'big bang' approach due to the timescales involved.

Audata has a track record of quick and effective implementations of ERMS using PRINCE 2 project management and its in-house systems development model. This is based on ISO 15 489, but it includes quality activities at every stage so that defects are identified as close to their source as possible, thereby reducing the time and associated costs to correct them later in the project's lifecycle.

The Project Board was made up of senior staff from within the Parks as Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) and Lead User, and an Audata representative. Both the Parks board members had a firm understanding of what the project involved and were able to make decisions when they were required, which was imperative to keep the momentum going and the project on time. The Project Manager, George Hipwell, has an in depth knowledge of the organisation and its people, which was to prove invaluable. Quality Assurance was provided by Angela Snowden, the IS Manager within the Parks. Eunice Gill, the Parks' Client Manager from the National Archives, attended many of the project meetings and was able to voice an independent opinion during discussions.

Installing and configuring the system

Two activities ran in parallel at the start of the project. A new server was procured, installed and tested, and three configuration workshops were held. Live and Training instances of the software were set up and tested. This first activity was relatively straight forward, as would be expected.

The configuration workshops were designed to produce a number of deliverables, the most important of which was the classification scheme. To do this, three workshops were held with a wide selection of Parks staff in attendance, including Park Managers, Office Managers, groundsmen and administrative staff, to ensure that all of the varied functions of the Parks were represented. This was important as the classification scheme built follows the FAT model (Function, Activity and Transaction). Throughout the three workshops, held in rapid succession, it was apparent just how dedicated the Parks staff are to their work and how well they understood their jobs.

The FAT model of classification is a useful tool to help with the rapid implementation of an ERMS, as nearly everybody within an organisation understands what it is that they do, which makes constructing and using the scheme straightforward.

Training

Once the system configuration had been drafted and reviewed, it was built into a training instance of the system. The project team took the view that further iterations of review would be useful but that the quickest way to do this would be to actually let people loose on the system, and that training would be the best way to do this. Training took place in three groupings.

First up were the administrators who undertook a four day training session. This was a group of five people, two of whom were from IS and are responsible for running the system and user maintenance, and three of whom were the people responsible for managing the system in terms of records management.

Next to be trained were the super users. This group was made up of people who are both knowledgeable of the Parks, and, very importantly, have a good level of IT competency. This group, of about 16 or so people, undertook a two day training course that not only covered the system, but also spent a great deal of time examining where users commonly have difficulties or make mistakes. This was done to ensure that users had help to hand when they were working back in their own Park.

The last and largest group to be trained were the standard users. They each received a day's training. It was at this stage that the training started to become tricky. It was only at the start of the day that the level of IT knowledge could be ascertained. For instance, some of the horticulturalists are world experts in their field but have little contact with computers. This meant that the training often had to be adapted at the start of each session to ensure that all the attendees were adequately looked after. This sometimes involved having to combine the planned training with a degree of IT training, for example, how to drag and drop, or how to right click with a mouse.

At the start of every training session, time was given to explaining why an ERMS was being implemented and a discussion held on the benefits of using an ERMS. This change management strategy was able to reinforce messages previously communicated in meetings and the project newsletters.

Training skills and sympathy

Fortunately the Audata staff working on the project all hold IT degrees as well as being qualified and experienced in records management. Other tactics that were successfully adopted to overcome this issue were to keep the training groups down to ten or less people and to have two trainers for every session, one leading and one assisting. This meant that individual attention could be given where necessary without overly disrupting the rest of the group.

A giveaway to spot the outdoor staff, apart from the boots, was that as soon as a break came along they would all head outside and sit under a tree to “get some fresh air”. Being inside for too long made them restless!

The Training instance of the ERMS used ensured that people could put ‘real’, meaningful records into the system, add some metadata, take them out, amend them and see the effects without actually affecting the Live system. This made training risk free, people could play about.

Feedback

At the start of all the training sessions, it was made clear that the classification was not the final one that would be implemented, rather that the project team was actively seeking feedback so that the classification could be amended to give as close as possible an accurate reflection of the Parks functions. The feedback was collected on a standard form so that the implications of making any changes were understood fully, thus ensuring that changes were made in a controlled manner. Changes were made to the Training instance of the system so that they could be tested prior to

implementation on the Live system, again providing a level of control and comfort.

Organisational support

Working with a relatively small organisation is a mixed blessing. There are problems, such as the disproportionate effect that one or two people being sick or on holiday can have on a training schedule, or simply having fewer people to do additional tasks. But the pluses were an ability to react fairly quickly to changes in circumstances and a greater commitment to the organisation from its staff.

As well as the Project Board, the Royal Parks had a Project Team which, in addition to the project board members, project manager and Head of IS, included the Records Officer, the Royal Park’s National Archive client manager and representatives from parks offices and headquarters. This team met approximately every two weeks to review progress and consider and provide advice on issues - like scanner policy. During this time, three editions of a project newsletter were issued to all staff explaining what was happening and what was about to happen.

Once the initial training was completed, it became clear that as people started to use TRIM there would be many changes to the initial Classification scheme. In order to ensure consistency of practice and to maintain the integrity of the classification scheme, the Royal Parks set up a process by which all changes were to be submitted on a standard pro forma setting out the change requested and the reason for it. Each request is then considered by a change management committee, comprising the system’s administrators, to consider whether the change is necessary, whether there is a better solution, and to maintain the integrity of the classification scheme.

Post training support

Once Parks staff had received their training, further support was offered. This involved Audata staff visiting each of the Parks in turn to provide desk side help. This provided an opportunity to address the specific needs of people. A number of things were covered in this support:

- All users were provided with a laminated one page quick guide that provided pointers on the essentials of the system, such as how to get records in and back out again. Feedback showed this to be a useful reference tool.
- General IT skills training was mixed in with the system specific training.
- Keep It Sane and Simple (KISS). At this stage, it was possible to narrow the training to what individuals needed to do. So for instance, if someone only needs to be able to look at a very specific set of records, they were shown how to access those records, not how to conduct a complex multi-layered search they neither needed nor understood.
- Set up the system so that individuals can easily do what they need to. So for instance, send a set of records to 'Favourites' so that they can be easily accessed. The arborists have to record which trees are felled, but don't use the computer for anything else. This information is all kept in the same place within the classification, so by making this part of the classification a 'Favourite', the arborists only need to click one button to be able to update their records.
- Superusers at every location proved to be essential. They acted as a first line of support and were often able to provide their colleagues with instant help.
- A program to Train the Trainers to allow Parks staff to train new starters is to be put in place. This reduces the Park's

dependency on Audata, and therefore costs, and allows them to take ownership of their ERMS.

This desk side support was conducted twice, the first time as close as possible to the training session, the second time a couple of weeks later to provide reinforcement and also to deal with any new issues that had arisen as a result of more experience with the system.

Legacy data

Super users were trained in how to migrate legacy data from their network drives into TRIM in effective and efficient ways to ensure that all necessary records were in the system.

Freedom of Information

A tool to manage FOI requests was developed by Audata using the TRIM software development kit (SDK). The **FOI Enquiry Review Tool**, otherwise known as Ferret, allows the Parks to track FOI requests easily and to flag those that are within 5 days, or any other duration the Parks define, of needing to be completed.

Conclusion

The implementation at the Royal Parks shows that an ERMS can be put into operation rapidly and effectively within an organisation that has a majority of its staff who are not office based or highly computer literate. This can be accomplished through putting in place the right team of suitably experienced and qualified people, careful planning, a quality assurance based implementation model and a thorough understanding of the needs of individuals within the organisation.