

Legacy Systems Migration at LeasePlan UK Ltd

Phil Parker is Director of Information Technology at LeasePlan UK. LeasePlan is the world's largest vehicle management and leasing provider with over 25 years experience in providing market leading solutions in the UK. Phil and his team had a serious software migration issue. Specific legacy applications were producing increasing operational problems, driving the need to migrate LeasePlan UK's core suite of applications. A key restriction was that the legacy systems in question interacted with the business through a Middleware platform that had been bespoke built and implemented only a few years ago and was, in itself, exhibiting legacy problems in terms of its poor manageability, maintainability and changeability.

Phil saw the problem as principally a skill and resource issue, "We suffered from a lack of in-house technical knowledge of the middleware tool and the technical confidence to maintain or significantly change the application built in it. This was compounded by a perceived lack of resources from the supplier of the middleware toolset, who had acquired the product recently amongst other software in their purchase of another vendor. My in-house team had no desire to keep their skills up to date in this product especially as it was perceived by them to be 'flaky' and a serious pain. Even the staff who knew something about the product were apt to disappear behind their screens when it was mentioned. Yet, the dependencies between the legacy components and the need for significant change to the middleware tool were confirmed by one of my project managers, Anthony O'Hara."

Anthony "It was clear to me that the legacy middleware was a significant stumbling block to

migration. The operational user problems it created could be severe, and managing the error logs had become a bit of a nightmare. As a result, a decision had been taken some time ago to freeze the system from any major enhancement or significant maintenance upgrade, and tackle changes through process 'work arounds'. This decision restricted us in other areas of our plans for example, we could not move from Windows NT to 2000/2003, the catch22 being that this upgrade would also have helped solve some of the middleware memory leakage issues"

Phil "About this time, we received a letter from Mouse Smart Software (MSS) an on-shore/off-shore software company, who claimed deep expertise in our middleware product and quoted references to other industry companies who had coped with this middleware tool and with similar migration problems to ours. I set up a first meeting, to get a feel for their technical capabilities and as importantly their cultural fit with ours. We are an open company, we built our reputation on the Open Calculation product and we believe in doing business in an open environment. I, also, require open and flexible relationships with all of our suppliers. We simply do not have the time nor patience to go through iteration after iteration of offers and bargaining and the 'sharpen your pencil one last time' routine. 'Be open, straight and reasonable; let's do business' being the mantra. I wanted to know whether our problem was soluble, and whether MSS would put their money where their mouth was in terms of fixed costs, guaranteed delivery times and most importantly, a set of improved performance metrics which would result from each and every work package.

I was impressed with the apparent honesty and openness of the MSS people at this first meeting and we quickly put together a plan for a short, sharp review of our systems status, which MSS would not charge us for unless we went forward to the next stage. With this completed on time, we had some horse trading around the next phase of deliverables and performance measures, but due to the openness and level of detail we were sharing this was not at all arduous. A couple of phone calls and emails sorted out a mutual deal and we proceeded to the next stage. This was delivered to time and budget and more importantly took us further forward with the system than we probably expected.

As we went forward together, our working relationship with MSS strengthened along the "trusted and open" criteria, which I do believe to be essential. For example, we had a serious Severity 1 systems issue with one of our legacy systems, where the root cause was proving difficult to diagnose, and the system was becoming increasingly unstable. I called MSS and asked if they could help. Although we have no contract for support (they have yet to send me an invoice!), they put in a full team at a couple of hours notice and worked into the night with my team to confirm the underlying problem area. The solution was implemented the next morning and all has been well since.

Finally, whilst being interviewed for this case, Sir Richard Heygate, the MSS Chairman asked me for advice on how their services and customer relationship should be developed further. Bridging the gap between a business, its processes, and how a technology underpins both, is the age old IT issue which technical skills alone can rarely achieve. MSS's approach takes them close with their openness, their proven delivery (for me) and technical skills. Apart from making sure that the 'Trusted and Open' culture did not get diluted as the company grew, my belief was that they should consider enhancing their legacy management service to include more application maintenance. This would probably mean maintaining permanent teams on-shore (backed up off-shore to improve economics) to retain people with deep knowledge of a customers application. Adding this to the MSS portfolio would close that business to IT gap even further, with less reliance on internal IT staff."

"In my view, such a service could be a great help to IT users with legacy problems, and of course the 'not me gov', I'm hiding behind this screen', which I mentioned earlier."



Phil Parker

Mouse Smart Software is a UK company with offices in Oxford and Varna, Bulgaria. MSS specialises in supporting complex, enterprise software recovery, optimisation and enhancement, often where legacy software and high transactional operational environments exist. All MSS projects are carried out to fixed price and fixed time, using highly skilled on-site client teams in the UK, supported by an advanced off-shore centre in Varna.