Outside the box: a non-library technological solution for research service management

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Abstract

In 2013 the New Zealand Parliamentary Library decided to bring its paper-based system for research requests management into the 21st century. It chose an out-of-the-box solution (Microsoft Dynamics CRM), which was also intended to be used throughout the Parliamentary Service (the administrative and support agency for Parliament) for managing relationships with members of Parliament.

Though not a library-specific technological solution, the choice to use CRM ended up being a strategic one. The Library was well placed to demonstrate the software's potential, and led the way in its use.

This paper will highlight the decision-making process that led to the selection of CRM; the drastic change in the method of recording research requests which this entailed; and the adoption of the new technology by Library staff.

Finally, this paper considers how using a shared system for managing research requests can re-position a Library within its parent organisation, highlighting the opportunities and challenges of following this strategy.

The Parliamentary Library

The Parliamentary Library is a combined library and research group, which functions as a division of the Parliamentary Service; the latter has six business groups:

- Finance
- Information Systems and Technology
- Organisational Strategy and Performance
- People and Culture
- Precinct Services
- Parliamentary Library

Until recently, it occupied a building that was physically separate from the rest of the Service (and in fact was an independent institution for about the first 120 years or so of its history). This could present challenges when acting as part of a larger organisation.

The Library has around 50 staff, and the research teams (comprising about 30 of those staff) undertake between eleven and twelve thousand research requests a year. Therefore, for many staff their focus is almost entirely on conducting responsive research.

How was this work managed?

For many years, incoming research requests were manually logged into a book, and recorded on yellow sheets of paper. Once completed (and at the end of each month), the content of those yellow sheets would be entered into a basic textbase. At that point, monthly reporting or statistics on research requests could be generated.

The system worked well enough, and caused few problems. Data in the textbase wasn't integrated (and also the technology had dated functionality) but staff were comfortable using it. It was also straight-forward to search. It was so intrinsic to the research service, that it was part of its identity.

Drivers of change

However, about six years ago a number of issues occurred simultaneously, and drove change:

• The General Manager wanted the ability to see any interactions/issues with a member of Parliament's office at any point in time

• The Service had procured Microsoft Dynamics CRM a few years earlier for financial 'case management' and for managing the 2008 election

• The Library underwent a service review that identified inefficiencies in research request workflow management

• The textbase that the Library used to record its requests was both nearing its capacity, and also the end of its lifespan.

Workflow automation project

Particularly with those last two points in mind, the Library approached the Service's Information Systems and Technology (IT) group, asking them to lead a project for a technological solution to managing workflow – the Workflow Automation Project.

The Library was well represented on the project team, who were otherwise made up of IT staff. It is worth mentioning as this point, that Library staff had identified certain library-specific workflow management solutions. They had informed IT of these, but they weren't actually considered as options by the project team.

Library staff on the project team were already aware of CRM as a potential solution, but didn't want to "pre-empt" any decisions around it. However, they wanted it explored as a possibility, as some had been exposed to it and liked what they saw.

Following its investigation, the project team put forward a business case with several options on how CRM could be used; the resultant recommendation was that CRM should be used with minor customisation. It appears that the Library needed to make some compromise to accommodate the needs of the wider Parliamentary Service – it wouldn't get a perfect Library solution, but the 'bigger picture' and strategy of the parent organisation was important.

This approach appears unusual for Library projects. Typically, when the Library runs projects (large or small), it puts forward numerous options (or may even consider every possible option). From those options, the 'best fit' solution will always be recommended.

CRM wasn't necessarily the best fit in this case. However, it did align with the strategy (or vision) of the organisation as a whole.

What is CRM?

Microsoft promotes it by saying "CRM stands for customer relationship management. It's a category of integrated, data-driven solutions that improve how you interact and do business with your customers. CRM systems and applications are designed to manage and maintain customer relationships, track engagements and sales, and deliver actionable data—all in one place." https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/dynamics365/what-is-crm

Essentially, CRM is designed to track customers. It is a business solution. This obviously isn't quite what parliamentary administrative services are. However, with growing focus on customer satisfaction, CRM is a generic and accessible product that is similar to the suite of other Microsoft products (Outlook, Office, etc.) that are often used, and that staff have a familiarity with.

The project team's recommendation was adopted, and work began on mapping from the old system to the new one. After the transition was completed, CRM's implementation and subsequent use became a great success for the Library.

Why was CRM not used more widely in the Service?

As mentioned, the Service had access to CRM for some time; however, its use was sporadic. The primary intention had been that it would be used for 'case management' and was to track the financial questions that MP's asked.

With time, it also became the source for all "core people data" (which was then integrated with all other Information Technology systems). However:

- 'Ownership' and maintenance of the data in CRM was not always defined
- Staff weren't given specific guidance
- Processes weren't always properly clarified.

Why did CRM work for the Library?

When it came to implementing CRM in the Library, there were established processes that were well documented, and so these could be passed on to IT as requirements. Essentially, the Library preferred not to change existing practice, except to replace the paper with technology.

This may have also been the expectation of staff when the technological solution was announced – that nothing would change, except that their work would be managed through the computer. With this level of change (in reality), such a transition would obviously never be that smooth. The key to manage such change was therefore to keep staff informed and involved.

Staff involvement

- Usability Acceptance Testing (UAT)
- Champions
- Group training
    - Delivered by both IST (functionality) and Library (scenario)
- One-on-one training

A couple of representatives from each of the Library's five teams were involved in UAT, to make sure the solution (CRM) worked. Not only this, but they would be involved in training delivery, and were to be used as trouble shooters (and 'champions') at 'go-live'.

Training

Training was provided prior to launch to the 50 or so affected staff. Typically, the IT group would provide generic systems training (i.e. Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook); however, the training required for Library staff had to take account of tying in the software with the process and data needing to be entered. Therefore, the delivery of training was split between IT (explaining the purpose of CRM and how it functions), and Library staff (walking through the scenario of entering information, and finding entries). This approach provided more support, more variety, and was possibly more interesting for participants. In addition to this, staff who were more likely to need support were given additional one-on-one training with one of the 'champions'.

This approach has been something that the Library now considers whenever looking at changing to a new system.

The launch

At the launch (a Friday, to provide a weekend buffer, as a precaution against potential serious mishap), an IT technician was on hand, with the 'champions' going through a configuration checklist as affected staff logged on for the first time.

There were a few of the usual concerns – that the process was time consuming; the technology was difficult to use; the performance of the system was slow – but CRM was generally well adopted, and it was used for every research request from day one.

Workflow became very visible, and the use of the technology became the norm. In addition, up-to-date reporting could be done instantly.

CRM in the wider organisation

Following the implementation of the Library's workflow automation, the use of CRM remained minimal around the rest of the Service. Its use was not regarded as a priority, and the rules around what CRM should and shouldn't be used for were still not explicit. Even when there were some user instructions created, it was never essential for staff to use CRM.

Then, last year, serious impetus came (as identified in a state sector-wide departmental review called the Performance Improvement Framework (or PIF Review)) to improve and better coordinate organisation-wide processes. The report noted that:

"The Service needs to translate its clear customer service purpose into a vision and business strategy that is widely understood and aspired to throughout the organisation. The Service requires a whole of organisation vision that can help bring its quite separate functional service areas together and help develop and embed a customer-centric approach." http://www.ssc.govt.nz/sites/all/files/pif-review-parl-service-july14.PDF p.10

The PIF Review statement notes organisational strategy, but one thing that closely relates to this are cross-organisational processes (that is, processes that involve input from many groups, such as when a new MP enters parliament, and requires financial set-up, IT services and hardware, Library access and induction, etc.).

CRM was identified as the technological solution, alongside making sure the processes themselves were robust.

Because it was something that had to happen, and it was both driven and led from the top of the organisation, it became a priority. Due to the fact that Library staff had been using CRM so heavily, they were involved in the roll-out of these processes to other groups within the Service.

Challenges

There are still some challenges to overcome. The Library has always proudly and diligently stood by the principle that research requests are made and conducted in complete confidence (and thus not accessible to anyone outside the Library). The Library closely monitors the privacy of the information.

When CRM was implemented for research request workflow, tight IT security separated the Library from the rest of the Service. This legacy now means that anyone outside the Library cannot access a complete view of all the interactions that an MP’s office has with the Service (the exception being for the Executive Leadership Team) - and vice versa. This may present a barrier if there are issues to be aware of, or to resolve. The effect that this could also have is that it perpetuates the ‘silo status’ of the Library from the rest of the service: as we had with our physical separation, we now have with of service visibility - or invisibility.

Having said that, it is still possible for anyone in the organisation to see when the Library have been assigned a task in an organisational-wide process, and when it has been completed.

Summary

Looking back, it was a calculated risk to use CRM as a solution for research request workflow management. The Library could have argued for a more tailored solution, specific to libraries : a solution that would have made previous research requests more findable. The Library could have offered a solution that would have acted as a true ‘knowledge-base’ (CRM has a convoluted ‘Advanced search’ that few staff have the time to study).

Even after the Library adopted CRM, for the most part it did so alone (within the Service). However, when the organisation decided to use it for cross-organisational processes a number of years later, the Library was well positioned to provide support in training, to be touted as a success story, and to provide advice (particularly in gathering and analysing customer insight) as subject matter experts.

CRM wasn’t specifically a library solution, but it worked, and positioned the Library within the Service. It’s implementation was a big change for staff, but due to the transition to automated workflow being well considered, it was relatively smooth transition, and has been something of a success story.

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