



Case study – Information Management

Rapid access to up-to-date and consistent data for HMG accountability

Background - the role of information in government

Working in a central government department has much in common with any other large organisation – there is a great need for high quality data, information and knowledge for use in formulating policy, monitoring achievements and progress and recording decisions and actions.

Government Departments are also required to provide timely and accurate answers to Parliamentary Questions (written and oral), and requests made under the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts. We also have to answer a wide range of correspondence from MPs prompted by their constituents as well as letters, emails and telephone calls directly from members of the public.

Several years ago my Department made the decision (since realised) to become the best in Whitehall in answering correspondence ie by meeting, or bettering the Whitehall Standard of answering correspondence within 20 working days. To achieve this we set up a centralised correspondence team and policy leads, who had previously answered queries in ‘their’ own areas, provided model responses to frequently asked questions and contributions to specific and more detailed queries. Correspondence service staff worked in Teams linked to Ministerial responsibilities and quickly developed their own knowledge about the policy area in question and good relationships with the Policy leads themselves.

The Information management (IM) challenge

Information Management Project 2014

The new system worked well but time and the volume of information generated created some problems. When I joined the Correspondence Service as Head of KM and with responsibility for managing the Department's Call Centre and improving knowledge management I identified several weaknesses in the current system, the main ones being

1. The database had become slow and cumbersome to use so team members were keeping commonly used standard letters on their personal drives. This increased the possibility of using out-of-date information to answer correspondence.
2. The database was so slow that it was not effective for Call Centre staff to use it for answering queries. This reduced their effectiveness in answering enquiries and the numbers of calls they could answer.
3. Only the Database Administrator could update the database from information received from the Policy leads.
4. Correspondence queries were 'classified' and allocated for response according to a list of subject headings proposed by the policy teams without any editing or shaping or reference to HMG taxonomy. This resulted in inconsistencies and misallocations.

Solution

A new Knowledge Service was under consideration, but competition for resources to develop this meant it never materialised.

My deputy KM manager and I saw the potential in newly introduced collaborative software and introduced a pilot service in one of the Correspondence teams. It was so successful that other teams demanded it and it was extended to the Call Centre.

Results

Collaborative inputs : Staff in the Teams (including call centre staff) could propose updates or changes to the 'model' or standard responses. These

would be reviewed by their Team Leader and eventually became the new standard. This enabled a wider range of expert contribution from the individual and group users who had most to gain from the system working well.

Fast access to accurate data : The new system offered faster access to the right information and made it easier to prohibit drawing on information filed in personal drives to answer queries.

Doing more with less : Speedy access to information allowed telephone enquiries to be answered faster and with better information. After one year I had reduced staff numbers and we were answering more enquiries than before. Call centre staff were more motivated because they were active contributors to their own knowledgebase

And the taxonomy – well, you can't win them all.