Case Study
Lastminute.com

lastminute.com

Transforming project delivery, streamlining work management and driving down costs at Lastminute.com with the integration of Microsoft Project and Portfolio server.

Lastminute.com is the most popular travel and leisure website in the UK with around 2.5 million visitors each week. The company is part of the Sabre Network which also includes Travelocity, Travelocity Business, HolidayAutos.co.uk, HolidayHotels.co.uk and All-Hotels. As a global lifestyle and travel business lastminute.com employs over 1,900 staff and is regarded as one of the most successful on-line travel brands globally.

The UK division of lastminute.com is the largest retailer of West End tickets, selling over 1.5 million theatre tickets every year. In addition, lastminute.com markets rooms from over 80,000 hotels and flights from over 300 airlines worldwide. In 2008 the business took 750,000 people on their annual package holiday and has recently offset 7,500 tonnes of carbon through its award winning "carbonwise" scheme.

In 2008, lastminute.com implemented the Microsoft Enterprise Project Management (EPM) suite with project management

experts Corporate Project Solutions (CPS) in order to improve project quality, visibility, productivity and value.

dotcom to dotnow

Launched in October 1998, lastminute.com has grown from a dotcom dream into one of the most successful global travel brands. As the company has expanded, through growth and acquisition, its technology infrastructure had become complex and diverse as different IT processes and systems have been integrated into the lastminute.com enterprise.

The rapid growth meant that the business had over 2,500 servers spread throughout Europe. The IT team consisted of numerous technicians and developers in eight countries and multiple project reporting systems were used throughout the business.

The diverse nature of the technology infrastructure and systems processes meant that integration between IT

Improving quality, predictability, productivity and value

systems and departments was challenging. Accountability was also widely spread with key systems located in different geographies being managed by different IT managers; making it difficult to pinpoint specific areas of responsibility within the IT team. At that time the business also had several separate international maintenance agreements with a multitude of different technology vendors.

None of these problems are unique to lastminute.com but what is perhaps unusual for a dotcom company is their desire to radically improve their technology delivery by embarking on a major transformation programme in the areas of people, application development and perhaps most significantly, project portfolio management.

In May 2005, lastminute.com was acquired by Travelocity, part of the Sabre group of travel companies. The technology leadership realised that the European team needed to evolve to the next level and introduce more structure, standards and simplification.

Fin Goulding, appointed CIO in 2007 in order to transform IT at lastminute.com comments that "For a number of years lastminute.com had been focused on becoming the number one brand in the online travel market. Having achieved this objective and having been acquired by an industry giant it was time to repay the years of technical debt that had been overlooked by this fantastic achievement."

Fin continues, "The IT team needed a focused set of methodologies and clear accountability in order to improve overall quality, productivity and value. There was a realisation throughout the business that the technology needed to evolve, not revolutionise; after all we didn't want to become a bank which is ironically my background and so the process began of transforming the darling of the dotcom boom."

With over 2,500 servers, 300 plus applications and a team of 350 technology staff, the IT leadership team, led by Fin, quickly realised that the business had lots of data but lacked information on which to base strategic IT decisions that accurately reflected the international business priorities. At this time Fin appointed Terry Dewhurst as Director of Transformation, who initiated and led the required transformation.

The IT transformation programme was named Z-ETA (being a derivative of "Zen and the art of EMEA Technology Abilities") and was launched to deliver all aspects of improvements within lastminute.com IT.

Realising the diverse and complex nature of project selection and execution within lastminute.com, Fin and Terry appointed CPS to install and manage the Microsoft EPM suite to provide the decision making support and control needed to underpin both the transformation journey and the long term management of the project portfolio.

Visible, Strategic & Accountable Project Management

In 2009 CPS installed and managed an end-to-end collaborative project and portfolio environment, comprising of Microsoft Project Professional, Project Server, Portfolio Server, Project Web Access, SharePoint and EPMoffice.

The installed solution has enabled lastminute.com's numerous projects to be more effectively managed throughout the project lifecycle from strategy definition, prioritisation, selection and project execution to benefit realisation.

Complementing the Microsoft EPM solution was the Project Portfolio Server which allowed lastminute.com to identify, prioritise and select the organisation's various change initiatives requested from all parts of the global business. This let the management team focus resources on the projects that best aligned with their business strategy.

By providing a structured approach towards company projects and programmes Lastminute.com had clear visibility of the corporate portfolio pipeline, allowing for effective and efficient planning of resources.

Direct Results from the Day One

Within the first six months following the CPS implementation there was an immediate change within the international project management team. This was based on two key areas - existing projects and future planning.

Fin explains, "The immediate benefits following the implementation were around existing project visibility. With a complete project management system in place we were able to fully understand exactly what projects had been started, where they were based and run from, the resources that were deployed and the progress that had been made."

Fin continues, "With a complete overview of the international project management arena the next step was to use the system to take information from the data. The metrics we took were both financially and team orientated and were based on the projects budget, the anticipated return-on-investment, whether the location and skills sets assigned to the project were appropriate and the project timeline. A system of dashboards and monthly reports were introduced throughout the project lifecycle which helped to reduce the complexity of existing projects. It also allowed pain points to be quickly understood and removed, strengthening the team and systems."

As well as the effect on existing projects, the second major advantage of the CPS implementation was on future planning. Fin explains, "By centralising all of the change initiatives of the business, we were able to prioritise existing and future projects based on the business objectives given to the information technology department by the Business leadership team. By bringing all of the project management resources together and understanding the existing project commitments we were able to improve our plans by measuring the effectiveness of completed projects, where, how and with whom to resource the development of new services as well as prioritise the replacement of legacy systems."

People Benefits

In addition to the immediate business benefits to lastminute.com there were a number of additional benefits to the project management team. Fin explains, "We were initially worried that introducing improved project accountability, systems and processes would affect the internal culture of a dot.com company, however, the actual affect was highly positive. Just because my Tech team doesn't fit the norm of suits and shoes, doesn't mean to say that they are not highly skilled professionals, they just needed to be given the opportunity to have access to tools & techniques provided by the Transformation program. In this situation the project management team benefitted from increased professionalism by learning new skills that meant they were better able to manage and implement the projects they were working on. Also, the entire team has benefitted from joint learning, training and development."

The Future

As the project management team continues to evolve Fin has three objectives for the future based around financial, strategic and people management goals. "One of the main drivers behind the ongoing use of the CPS project management toolset is to continue to improve project delivery through an amalgamation of best practices. As a business we have taken huge steps forward however there is always more to be done. Another goal is to improve business collaboration. Lastminute.com has a diverse and highly skilled workforce with resources spread throughout eight countries - utilising these resources by working collaboratively will be crucial to our global business."

Fin continues, "Integrating with our agile software development toolset is another highly important area as we link the time recorded in our Agile development software (VersionOne) into Project Server to provide a complete resource management solution. The need for a collaborative and holistic toolset to support these transformation efforts has been crucial and will continue to allow us to have the right resources, working on the right projects, in the right place. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we will aim to increase the proportion of projects and programmes delivered that are directly linked to the corporate strategy - making sure that the work of the project management team is directly driving the lastminute.com business strategy."

"We anticipate that the implementation by CPS, together with our improved processes, will reduce the cost of IT delivery at lastminute.com by improving quality, predictability, productivity and value."

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