

# QLD Housing calls for help

How a new spin on document management software helped revolutionise customer service.

— **By Natalie Hambly** —



When your house is filling up with water, you don't want to be told to hang on a minute while the operator tries to figure out the correct maintenance procedure. You want to receive helpful advice immediately, and know exactly when someone is coming out to help.

When you are the landlord of 35,000 residences and fielding hundreds of calls like this a

week, you would want to be responding as quickly and efficiently as possible, with the right answer every time.

Guaranteeing this was the task given to Helen Wood, call centre manager for the Queensland Department of Housing. Consisting of 17 area offices, the Department of Housing is responsible for around 35,000 public residences covering the

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area from Radcliff to Ipswich. Effectively acting as a landlord to the thousands of occupiers, the department receives more than 1000 calls a week from residents requesting household maintenance help, and it wanted to make the process of answering these calls more efficient and cost effective, while increasing customer satisfaction.

## The good old days

Two and a half years ago, when Wood was hired, eight of the area offices within the department were taking calls from public housing residents. It wasn't a full-time job; the operators were answering the phones on top of their other duties. The calls would range in requests and severity of the problem: one call could be about a broken bath, and the next call could be a leaking gas system. It was up to the operator to give immediate advice, such as directing the resident to turn off the gas at the main, determine whether a maintenance person would be needed to visit the residence, and assign a priority to the job, ie, whether it needs to be fixed within the hour, or in 24 hours.

When Wood arrived with the task of making this more efficient, there was no data on how many calls were coming in, duration of the calls, and the operators were relying on their own experience and knowledge to respond to the problems, such as flooding kitchens, leaking gas systems, or insect infestations. People answering the phones were just experienced enough to use their own knowledge to deal with the problem.

"While people had a good understanding of what the priorities should be—and they were certainly agreed within the department—in the actual delivery people were relying on their memory and their interpretation of that," says Wood.

However, this made it difficult to train new staff, and it left the department at risk of losing a lot of in-house expertise if one of those experienced staff members decided to leave. More importantly, it also meant there was no quality control on the service given to residents.

Since then, the Department of Housing, at Wood's direction, has set up a call centre to manage all of the maintenance requests. However, it took a year-long investigation to come to that conclusion. "We looked at a range of options, the



call centre was the preferred option for a number of reasons: economy of scale, the fact that you could set a new level of service standards, and implement call centre systems that would allow us to meet those," she says.

After the decision, it took another year of planning and building before the call centre was operational. One of the most important parts was figuring out how to best display maintenance procedures. Having call operators use their own experience and knowledge to respond to maintenance requests was no longer acceptable. In order for the new call centre arrangement to be a success, there needed to be a better way of creating a knowledge base of maintenance procedures. How efficient and accurate the operators could be would all depend on how the relevant information was retrieved.

"What I needed was a system that gave consultants a consistent way to process their calls to make sure a) they were consistent and b) the priorities were right every time," explains Wood.



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Helen Wood, Queensland Department of Housing

### Searching for software

This left Wood with the dilemma of finding the right software for the job. While she didn't know what product to go with, she did know what functions were needed.

“I just knew that I wanted it online and I knew the sort of features that I wanted . . . to be able to search on keywords, you needed content arrangement where people could look up by content, preferably indexes,” says Wood.

Added factors were a small budget—certainly a large software implementation by a major CRM vendor was not really an option—and also the fact that Wood needed to cater for an unknown future.

“We were saying we need to get the business outcomes we want without investing a lot of money so that if want to change it in the future we are not locked in. So we really wanted the business to drive the technology as opposed to the other way around,” she explains. “If I or the department

had invested into really expensive systems, once you are locked in to those arrangements it is really hard to get out of them.”

This is where Republico came in. As it happened, at the same time Wood was searching for call centre software, other areas of the department were looking for software to publish manuals online, so a working group was put together to find a joint solution.

A member of the group stumbled across Republicorp (at the time the company was called Virtual Media) and invited the company to give a demonstration of its product Republico. It fit the bill. The price was right and it was customisable so Wood could adapt its functions for the call centre. Also, the software was easy to use which meant the call centre would be able to retain a level of autonomy. Wood didn't want a situation where they were reliant on Republicorp to make any changes to the software, which could range from changing a telephone number, a maintenance priority (for example, the length of time a hot water system

should be repaired in), or a larger change such as adding a new product.

## Developing Republico

Zeina Khoder, national product manager at Republicorp, describes Republico as electronic document and knowledge management software.

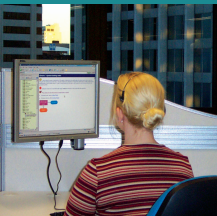
“Republico is very customisable in terms of its catalogues, it’s really about managing the document creation process,” says Khoder.

Originally designed to publish manuals online, it hadn’t been used in a call centre environment before.

constructing your business processes and reconstructing them. There was a lot of work going into figuring out how we do maintenance and redesigning it in a way that you can capture it on screen.

“The really challenging part was how do you present this sort of information that people have just done intuitively before. People in our offices have done this work for a long time and were very good at it, but had just passed it on,” she says.

Now all of the problems that customers ring in for are indexed in the database. Operators just have to search the index for the topic, and on the screen will be step-by-step instructions on what to tell the client and what actions to take.



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“The way I think of how it evolved for the call centre is that Virtual Media [now Republicorp] and us created a bit of a joint ‘what can we do with this thing’ and we got together and we came up with it together,” explains Wood.

It was at Wood’s request to take the maintenance call procedures and put them online and present them in a way that call operators could search through the text dynamically. From Wood’s point of view, she didn’t want to require call operators who were also experts in maintenance.

“I didn’t want to teach them what a hot water system was and how to fix it if it was broken, and what priority to assign it if it was leaking, that sort of thing. What I wanted was a system that told them when the client said ‘my hot water system is leaking’, they would go through a process on the screen that would give them an answer,” she says.

Khoder says the Department of Housing needed a scripting tool so the software could take the consultants through the procedures dynamically step by step, showing them what to say to people.

“We worked with them on redeveloping their information architecture,” says Khoder. “A great deal of time was spent looking at the information and customising the content.”

According to Wood, this was the hardest part of the whole exercise. “The hardest part is de-

“We had to put a lot of time and effort into process engineering which contributes to our ability to do this. We have got actual process maps—decisions maps on every screen that give yes/no directions and the answer changes depending on whether it is a yes or no and you step through a process,” explains Wood.

“Our aim was always that the systems would give them the information and the knowledge that they needed and they could focus on processing the calls, getting our service right with the client,” she says.

## The implementation

Defining the content and then loading it into the program was the lengthiest part of the software implementation. The department needed someone inputting data consistently for six months, and at times there were as many as four people working on that simultaneously.

The actual implementation of the software was a fairly quick process. This included defining the structure and the look and feel of the program. Khoder estimates that it took around three months in the implementation stage and another month of testing. There was no need for the Department of Housing’s IT department to get involved, as it

was a fairly simple installation. The main requirement was that everyone was working off the same operating system.

As for what went wrong, Wood says the whole experience has been a fairly smooth process. "In the beginning [support] was fairly heavy because they had to teach us how to use it, get us to a point where we were self sufficient, and that was always their goal which was a big bonus for us," says Wood. "We are now totally self sufficient in terms of content, and I have a person here now that knows the system well enough to add icons, change structure.

"Since we moved out of pilot phase and testing phase we haven't had any problems with [Republico] at all. The very odd hiccup you might get is not related to the software, it might be that we have our systems down, as everyone goes through from time to time, but we haven't had any problems with the software," says Wood.

## Counting the benefits

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While Wood wouldn't divulge the cost of the project

or the Department's budget, Khoder says most Republico projects range in cost from \$10,000-\$20,000. Whatever the cost was, for Wood the effort was worth it. Implementing Republico means that training call centre staff is now much easier.

"One of the real benefits of this is that I can bring someone in virtually off the street with no training and they could sit down and pretty much get it right 98 percent of the time," says Wood. "But we have invested in a lot of training for the staff, and because of the system the training could be focused on navigation, client service, key performance indicators . . . not on hot water systems, maintenance, and drains."

Of course the end goal was always to increase customer service, and Wood reports regular and positive feedback from clients.

"It's been fabulous, I have been very happy with it. We are processing more calls, [around 2500 a week] we are currently experiencing between 20 and 40 percent increase on the calls we were taking previously. And we have had a saving in the number of staff that is required to do those calls," she says. "We are doing more calls with less." ●