



Fire Service Collaboration Technology Adopted by 60 Per Cent of Staff in Six Months

Customer: West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service
Website: www.westyorksfire.gov.uk/
Number of Employees: 1,900
Country or Region: United Kingdom
Industry: Government—Fire agencies

Customer Profile

West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service is responsible for protecting from the risk of fire 2 million people across the north of England.

Business Situation

The fire brigade wanted to create a digital hub for the organisation to improve collaboration between teams and within departments, as well as with statutory partners.

Solution

Microsoft Gold Certified Partner Black Marble conducted a health check of the existing Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 deployment, and, as a result, recommended standardising on Microsoft technologies.

Benefits

- Central location for business information
- Development platform for new applications
- User-friendly tools require little extra training
- Deployment creates interest from other brigades

“We now have many other fire and rescue organisations interested in visiting West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service to see how successful we’ve been at deploying SharePoint Server 2010.”

Katy Pinder, ICT Project Manager, West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service

West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service is at the forefront of innovative technology solutions for emergency services in the United Kingdom. The fire brigade wanted a single digital hub for the organisation to improve collaboration and work more efficiently with its partners. Previously, information was stored disparately, resulting in wasted time and delays in coordinating fire safety work. The service decided to standardise on Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010, after a health check on its existing Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 implementation. After just six months, around 60 per cent of the fire brigade staff is using the new collaboration technology. Other fire and rescue services are visiting West Yorkshire to see how the solution works and why user adoption has been so rapid.

Business Needs

West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service is responsible for providing services to 2 million people in local communities and businesses, over an area of 800 square miles in the north of England. The fire brigade is at the forefront of cutting-edge IT solutions for public safety organisations, but needed to improve collaboration between teams and within departments. The vision that emerged

around creating a digital hub for information storage and retrieval also involved making it easier to work with statutory partners, including other emergency services and local authorities.

The initiative needed to bear in mind the geographically dispersed structure of the service, with 48 fire stations

including whole time, day crewed, and retained duty systems. Katy Pinder, ICT Project Manager, West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service, says: "In common with most fire and rescue services, we have employees with a range of IT skills across the workforce. Some staff know the basics, but others are part of the Facebook generation, so their knowledge of IT is more extensive. We needed a solution that would result in widespread adoption throughout the organisation, as well as improve communications with our partners in community safety initiatives."

Until recently, the fire brigade was using Novell NetWare file shares for document storage and retrieval, and Novell GroupWise for messaging. The service also had an existing Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 implementation, but Pinder and her colleagues were uncertain as to whether it was suitable to support the brigade's vision.

She says: "Given the way it had initially been configured by a supplier, Office SharePoint Server 2007 was initially only minimally used in the organisation. We wanted a resilient solution that would act as a hub—whether it was used as an environment for sharing information or to host third-party applications. And to do that, we needed an experienced company with which to build a long-term relationship."

Pinder and her team also considered Novell Teaming and Conferencing and the SUSE Linux operating system, which were obvious alternatives given the in-house experience of using Novell. They decided to carry out a health check on Office SharePoint Server 2007 before making a decision.

Solution

The fire brigade invited Microsoft Gold Certified Partner Black Marble to conduct the health check. Rik Hepworth, IT Director at Black Marble, says: "The health check reveals the causes of problems, not just the symptoms—

helping you take a proactive approach. This methodology, with minimal intrusion into the business, uncovers potential risks and optimises productivity."

Due to the load balancing carried out by Black Marble, the fire brigade saw an immediate improvement in performance. The knowledge transfer that took place during the health check in line with Microsoft Services best practice guidelines for SharePoint technology helped the information and communications technology (ICT) department gain an enhanced understanding of the technology. Pinder says: "We have full confidence in the work carried out by Black Marble, due to its adherence to best practice with Microsoft portals and collaboration technology."

In the first quarter of 2010, with the health check complete, the fire brigade decided to standardise on Microsoft technologies and migrate all file shares to Microsoft SharePoint Server 2007, with systems integration assistance from Black Marble. The partner was involved in the technology adoption programme for Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010 and has recently assisted West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service in migrating to the newest version. It also agreed to standardise on other Microsoft products, including Microsoft SQL Server 2008 data management software to replace Microsoft SQL Server 2003, and Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 for email messaging instead of Novell GroupWise.

Pinder says: "In many ways it would have been the easy way out to deploy Novell Teaming and Conferencing. In fact, my experience has been largely in Novell technologies, but the support for Novell NetWare is nowhere near as good as for SharePoint. In addition, our partners were increasingly turning to Microsoft. We were already using Active Directory services for identity

management and are currently migrating to Exchange Server 2010." The infrastructure for Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010 includes clustered servers for greater resilience. Pinder adds: "SharePoint is now the prime digital hub of the organisation and a business-critical system that is required to support our staff in their fire prevention and rescue work around the clock. Microsoft support gives us the confidence to build on SharePoint for the future."

Ranjit Sodhi, Services Partner Lead, Microsoft UK, says: "This deployment is an excellent example of how using Microsoft Services IP has helped Black Marble to deliver a compelling customer-centric solution within a highly competitive IT environment."

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KatyPinder, ICT Project Manager, West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service

Benefits

West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service is working smarter with a single digital hub for document storage and retrieval, combined with an environment to handle development of business-critical applications. Choosing SharePoint

Server 2010 over Novell software makes it easier for the brigade to collaborate with its partners in West Yorkshire. Expertise from Microsoft Gold Certified Partner Black Marble has resulted in significant knowledge transfer and greater resilience. User adoption has been rapid, with 60 per cent of the organisation using the solution. Pinder says: “We now have many other fire and rescue organisations interested in visiting West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service to see how successful we’ve been at deploying SharePoint Server 2010.”

Brigade Creates Central Location for Business Assets and Information

The new digital information hub gives West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service a central location for its business assets and information for the first time. The previous system was time consuming to manage, with geographically dispersed districts having their own file servers and no connectivity between them. She says: “Having started to roll out the Microsoft solution at the beginning of 2010, around 60 per cent of the brigade’s 1,900 staff are now using it through My Site portals in SharePoint Server 2010. They provide users in the organisation with a rich set of social networking and collaboration features, as well as instant access to brigade policy documents and business processes.”

The specialist teams—for example, officers who are working on fire investigation projects—find the collaboration technology especially useful and value the ability to tag photographs for easy retrieval. Pinder says: “Previously, information about, for example, arsonists, was held in silos, resulting in delays in following up suspected arson attacks using manual cross checks. With all this information held in one data repository, it’s much easier to search and conduct enquiries across the organisation.”

Technology Offers Development Environment for New Web-Based Applications

SharePoint Server 2010 is helping the fire brigade improve its efficiency by providing a development environment for business-critical web-based applications that can be accessed from computers or mobile devices. Due to the health check by Black Marble, the collaboration solution is now aligned with best practice, which has maximised system uptime and reduced maintenance costs. Pinder says: “The health check helped considerably with integration with the database management software and ironed out any performance issues. Our future plans involve making greater use of the key features of SharePoint Server 2010 and all it has to offer.”

User-Friendly Toolset Results in Better Decision Making

With business-critical information at their fingertips, decision making by managers at West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service has improved. Pinder says: “Some users access their My Site portals just to view information, but increasingly our different teams are using the technology to create libraries of documents and policy guidelines—previously, some of these were held in paper form at fire stations and could not be easily located. More effective file sharing has resulted in less duplication of reporting and better decision making.”

Deployment Creates Interest from Other Fire and Rescue Services

Since West Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service went live with SharePoint Server 2010, considerable interest has been expressed by other U.K. fire services, which have visited the brigade’s headquarters in Bradford for a briefing. Pinder says: “The key question from other fire and rescue services is often ‘where do you start?’ In addition, we’re asked how we established the right governance and policies for the

use of Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010.”

Pinder and her colleagues respond by explaining about the support available from Microsoft and its partner ecosystem, but they also highlight the internal procedures they’ve used to encourage adoption across the organisation. She says: “We have to recognise that within the workforce there are staff with vastly different levels of computer skills. But with advocacy from super-users—who are there to encourage the less technically skilled—we’ve overcome any resistance to the new tools.”

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