Executive Opinion

Phil Collins, **Head of IM&T /** West Midlands Ambulance Service

West Midlands Ambulance Service (WMAS) is the second largest ambulance service in the UK and recently had to look at overhauling its entire IT system. We spoke to Phil Collins, Head of Information Management and Technology at WMAS, about his experience of working with IMGROUP to migrate to the Cloud. Phil has been with WMAS for 10 years having joined the organisation in 2003.

Phil explains more...

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Background to the project

The merger of several services meant WMAS had various legacy IT systems in operation, making it challenging for staff to communicate and collaborate effectively due to the lack of standardisation. With no common email platform, staff did not have a consolidated email address book with which to locate colleagues easily around the whole region, and using different systems resulted in a lack of version control. Many of these IT systems were coming to the end of their life and storage space was increasingly limited.

"Many of our IT systems were running out of capacity and maintenance costs were beginning to increase. None of the individual systems were large enough or new enough for the whole organisation to move over to so we needed to look at overhauling our entire IT system", said Phil.

Initially WMAS was focussed on procuring an email system and considered NHSmail, a system which is widely used within the health community. However, there were storage limits which would have meant an archiving solution was needed, as well as migration and other additional costs such as active sync to BlackBerrys for example. "The system we ended up with is much more than just email and has helped move the organisation forward in terms of collaborative working", Phil added.

Having previously undertaken IT projects in-house WMAS chose this time to work with IMGROUP, the information management specialists, and began exploring the potential of moving to the cloud. "The government backing gave the cloud credibility and as the G Cloud framework is already there the procurement process was much faster and simpler. As a G Cloud provider, IMGROUP had the implementation expertise to guide us and help accelerate the project quickly", said Phil.

"Securing management backing for the project was relatively simple as it was clear that something needed to be done and the costs were largely managed within our own IT budget", continued Phil. "Educating staff on how to use the new technology is an ongoing process. I would advise anybody undertaking a similar project to plan in advance how to engage with staff and implement training and education programmes in parallel with the migration and beyond."

Having IMGROUP on board meant that the migration went as smoothly as possible. Phil advocates using a third party to oversee deployment and ensure timescales are kept to as much as possible. "We really benefitted from the expertise of IMGROUP during this period. Its consultants were able to focus entirely on the migration and keep the project on schedule, something which we would have struggled with had we tried to handle this in-house."

The business benefits

WMAS now operates on a combination of Microsoft Office 365, including Microsoft Lync, and SharePoint 2010 and the additional facilities have greatly benefitted the organisation. The availability of video conferencing, BlackBerry integration, remote access for staff and Wi-Fi has led to savings, both in terms of cost and also time.

Phil explained, "As an organisation, WMAS covers over 5,000 square miles with around 100 sites within that. The ability to connect to the IT network remotely or host area manager meetings by video conference, using SharePoint to share content, means that our staff are spending less time travelling to and from meetings, which in turn saves on travel expense costs." Phil referred to a bi-weekly meeting of 12 operational managers and estimates that from just these two meetings, approximately 40 hours of management time a month are saved as a result of these new facilities.

"Another example of when the new technology really demonstrated its value was during an upgrade of the non-emergency patient booking system. A wide group of stakeholders needed to be kept updated on progress so we created a Microsoft Lync conversation so that staff at various sites could be kept up to date with progress and could easily communicate their local status," Phil explained. "This has also resulted in a change to our standard business continuity process – we will now consider using Lync every time a significant upgrade or fault occurs".

The overriding results of this project are the standardisation of high quality modern solutions across the organisations' entire IT network, as well as earning WMAS a reputation as a figurehead for technology innovation in the NHS. This was the first Microsoft Cloud deal to be transacted under the UK Government's G-Cloud's Framework.

Phil concluded, "The IT systems we now have in place are truly industry leading for the healthcare sector. IMGROUP gave us the ability to combine cloud services with our on-premise applications, delivering exactly what we needed".