Dorset probation area

Company: PumatechCustomer: Dorset Probation AreaSubmitted by: KaizoDate: July 2001Helping offenders stay out of trouble is the responsibility of the National Probation Service for England and Wales. Using Pumatech's Satellite Forms software, the Dorset Probation Area has implemented a new handheld-based questionnaire. Designed for probation officers to assess offenders' basic skills, the application is fast, accurate and cost-effective.

Established under the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act in April 2001, the National Probation Service for England and Wales is responsible for 42 Probation Areas. Its aims are to protect the public, supervise offenders and prevent re-offending. Dorset Probation Area has 40 probation officers looking after 2, 021 offenders. Just under half of offenders are believed to have skills' problems such as poor numeracy and literacy. Funded by the Home Office's Pathfinder initiative, a new project looks set to help. Pathfinder projects are developed with individual probation areas and, if successful, made available nationwide.

Dorset's task has been to trial questions developed by Oxford University's Centre for Criminological Research.

Paper-based Forms

According to IT Systems Support Officer Andy Morgan, Dorset is committed to streamlining its administrative workflow. Several database applications had been developed using Lotus Notes in line with national standards. Office automation was managed centrally using Citrix Winframe technology across 13 offices. Completing 200 four-page questionnaires monthly meant an extra

workload for hard-pressed staff. Despite early misgivings, the project's importance was never in doubt.

The questionnaire probed basic skills, asking about numeracy, literacy and other factors to assist pre-sentence reporting. Once the work started, it proved tedious to repeat information held elsewhere. Questions were skipped, scores not calculated and completed forms destined for key departments were mislaid. Undertaking insufficient assessments compromised service standards, which, in turn, had budgetary implications." With no time to fill the form in properly, the accuracy was quite low.

The amount of paper circulating meant it was a costly questionnaire to process," explains Morgan.

Comparing the Options

With the trial at risk, Morgan decided to look for alternatives. The main objective was to increase accurate completion rates for a better understanding of offenders' needs. Although a PC-based form seemed ideal, probation officers preferred eye contact and correct body language with violent offenders. Desktops and laptops were ruled out in favour of a Palm OS handheld. In considering this option, Morgan says that any handheld application had to be " cost effective and robust" with a " superb graphical interface" for easy use.

With no previous experience, Dorset was wary of the technical issues." The ideal solution was to use a Palm OS device to link to Lotus Notes. We'd already implemented a court and offender tracking database using Lotus Notes so keeping the same environment was important." Wanting rapid

application development and flexibility, Morgan then compared software tools with compiled executables. The main requirement, he adds, was a two-way interchange of data between the Palm OS device and Lotus Notes.

" My researches revealed that Pumatech had released Satellite Forms Server and I read lots of good reviews."

Confidence Building

The proof that Satellite Forms met the requirement was satisfied thanks to trial software and a demonstration. Not only did it provide the answers but there was also great potential for other applications." Satellite Forms Server gave me centrally-managed access and application ownership. I liked the user interface and the ease of generating forms.

It was cost-effective too." To help prepare probation officers for the change, several were given Palm OS compatible Handspring Visor Deluxe handhelds for Lotus Notes diaries and e-mail using Pumatech's Intellisync for synchronisation. Morgan then took a day's training from a Pumatech engineer who also advised on Lotus Notes integration across a standard ODBC interface." Pumatech offered very good advice plus excellent follow-up support. Their expertise was crucial to a successful project plan and forms development." The completed form is fairly simple, consisting of a series of check boxes and drop-down lists for multiple choice answers.

Morgan stresses the importance of thinking carefully about how the form works beforehand. However, its generation with Satellite Forms is " very rapid" thanks to an intuitive drag and drop interface.

Easier to Use

Following a short trial alongside the paper forms, several officers switched to handhelds in March 2001. For day-to-day use, offenders' personal details are automatically extracted from the court and offender database into an assessment project database. The questions are held in the same database and linked into the downloaded form, ensuring the latest version is always used.

The assessment process starts with a hotsync session to download personal details and the form into the handheld. Having selected the right offender, probation officers complete the questionnaire during an interview. The information is then hotsynced back into the Lotus Notes database via Satellite Forms Server and made available county-wide within minutes. Automatic form scoring helps reduce the probation officer's workload. Morgan says that users are finding the new system an effective and productive tool for accurate assessments without having to write anything down. Information is now easily shared with key departments including Research & Information and Education, Training & Employment.

Offenders gain by being better understood and receiving appropriate training." The benefit for probation work in Dorset is huge as the technology speeds up the assessments. There is a good potential for saving money once everyone uses the system," commented Morgan. Dorset's IT personnel are pleased with the rapid and secure development environment. For example, any new handheld applications can be remotely managed using Satellite Forms Server while plug-in Handspring memory modules may eventually support a secure Dangerous Offenders Register.

Another positive factor for Morgan has been the " very good" level of technical support received. " There's a lot of future in Pumatech's Satellite Forms as they are always adding new features." Full deployment across Dorset Probation Area is the next step. There is also interest from neighbouring Hampshire Probation Area while the Home Office's Pathfinder team is being kept informed. Other applications seem likely in addition to greater use of handhelds for e-mail and shared diaries. And given the benefits of Satellite Forms technology so far, its use by other probation areas seems certain.