

MAKING THE MOST OF TECHNOLOGY

Business solutions may sound like a well-worn cliché, but even the property industry is in need of them. Loci Solutions' Nikki Steadman and Michelle Matkins spoke to Amal Awad about software solutions and going green.



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SOFTWARE IN THE property industry is an increasingly important aspect of business management. In fact, it’s a sector that is experiencing incredible growth, if you ask Nikki Steadman, CEO at Loci Solutions, driven by rising demand from the industry.

“We started because we identified a ... growing gap in support and service to clients that were post-initial implementation of various systems, and it’s been our goal to provide superior real estate technology consulting using best-of-breed practices and solutions for those clients,” she says.

It’s an important time for such a business, coming off the GFC. Michelle Matkins, business development manager at Loci Solutions, notes that, post-crisis, many [organisations] were looking to reduce their gearing and increase their asset values – and in the process mitigate risk.

This has had a crucial impact on Loci’s business, which assists professionals to get the most out of their technology by improving processes and increasing efficiency – cost effectively.

Working purely in the commercial market, it has thus far focused on property management and general ledger (GL) functionality.

Steadman attributes the organisation’s rapid growth over the past five years to its service model. Now they are going green, in response to a shift in clients’ demands – an emphasis on sustainability and green initiatives.

“There’s a move for green technology, moving offices into that paperless situation. It hasn’t been what we’ve focused on previously, but we’re being encouraged by our client base to move more and more into that space,” says Steadman.

In this case, “going green” is anything that rids an office of paper: solutions in the form of document management, data capture and purchase to pay, right

down to property management and general ledger products, where system-enabled workflows get rid of any paper-based approval documents.

Matkins says the focus on cutting costs also led to a review of business processes for many organisations, to make sure critical ones are streamlined, automated, visible and verifiable.

“There was a dramatic shift from business-as-usual to a lot of introspection, which led to having a look at all of this kind of technology and how it could possibly support those goals.”

This trend is prompting a move into activity-based workplaces (ABWs), she adds, as costs of space and labour continue to increase. Others, who just want to review their processes, are also a good fit for green technology.

Document management and capture solutions, amongst other things, are central to this process of going paperless, and mobility, security and useability are key concerns.

“Mobility is an evolving trend in document management systems,” says Lee Bourke, CEO, FileBound Australia.

“It becomes even more important when you have that second level of system where you’ve got business process work flow and automation because you don’t want your business-critical processes being held up because someone is off-site or in a meeting.”

There is also the issue of security, he says. “Common sense tells you that using a cloud provider is less secure.”

However, the counter argument is: how secure is your internal environment, particularly when you consider that the most common security issue that hits any system is actually the staff around it?

Bourke also says the proliferation of the internet browser has changed the way people want to deal with their files.

“People don’t want to have to load another piece of software to get used to. They want to be able to go to a browser and actually use the system intuitively, so usability is a really key aspect and when you’re talking about adoption, it can be a significant part of the challenge.”

Despite the challenges, Matkins emphasises the business drivers for implementing technology, and argues they are about more than costs and time savings.

“It’s cost controls, visibility, disaster recovery plans and really making sure that they automate and streamline those processes,” she explains.

Business, she adds, is driving technology, not the other way around, a far cry from previous forms of technology that were rigid and forced businesses to mould themselves to work with it.

“Now you’re seeing that technology can be deployed in the cloud, it can be deployed in your office, it’s often mobile, where you can get requests for information or have that information delivered to you on your mobile,” Matkins notes.

“You can deploy that information through portals on your website, so that you can communicate more efficiently with your investors, your suppliers, your employees.

“So the technology has become more flexible and configurable, it’s certainly become more scaleable, because we’ve gone global too, right?”

Steadman says the property industry is definitely picking up the pace in embracing technology, but as Matkins points out, as an industry, its conservative approach is understandable.

“A lot of the information is highly sensitive, it’s got a lot of risk to it,” Matkins says.

But they say technology is becoming far more comprehensive in addressing complex processes.

“For example, we used to only be able to perhaps

automate the invoicing segment of it,” Matkins says. “Now you’re starting to see purpose-built solutions for real estate that allows you to go all the way from procurement right through to the budget comparison process. That is relatively new in our industry.”

In essence, it’s getting easier and more economical, particularly with greater ease of data integration.

“I guess [it’s getting] more configurable, rather than needing development or customisation for the industry,” Steadman says.

Nevertheless, Steadman sees increasing the industry’s understanding as one of the more immediate challenges they face.

“Educating the market, educating businesses that these types of solutions, these green technologies ... don’t necessarily mean a lot of additional cost, that the return on them can be retrieved very, very promptly.”

Accounts payable (AP) automation, for example, cuts the cost of invoicing significantly.

“It’s hard to argue with a technology investment that offers an average of a 50 percent decrease in cost and return on investment within a year,” says Tom Coolidge, CEO, Nexus Systems.

An expert on AP automation, he suggests people want a turn-key solution that is relevant to the real estate industry.

“The technology has become a lot more sophisticated in the past five years or so and AP automation has become a standard business practice in many industries,” he says.

“Real estate has some sophisticated needs when it comes to things like purchasing, cap-ex controls and outgoing reconciliations. There are very few players in the market who are developing software focused solely on the real estate industry that offer things like standard integrations to the major property general ledger packages.” ■



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