

It's as easy as ICT

It's time you took control of your information, communication and technology before somebody else does,
say Andrew Waller and Bob Thompson



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The word technology usually provokes one of two reactions. People either love to talk about the latest gadget and how their iPhone has changed their lives or the reaction is a negative one, with people proclaiming that: 'we have a useless IT department – it's always going wrong.' Often both comments can be heard simultaneously. This highlights a perceived disconnection between personal and corporate technology. If you doubt the veracity of this, try downgrading a manager's phone.

Making the best of information, communication and technology (ICT) has little to do with a new colour screen on your Blackberry and everything to do with competing for scarce resources within your organisation. The Corporate Real Estate (CRE) team is sometimes not always well understood by their Board of Directors, and effective IT use can help build the team's reputation. Failure to grasp these opportunities will allow other support teams such as IT and HR to benefit from better investment opportunities.

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Furthermore, allowing the IT team to determine the ICT support for CRE can give up value judgements on your objectives to another team, which is not a good place to be. In practice, the goals of most corporate property teams are attributed to three points:

1. To reduce the costs of real estate as much as possible
2. To help the business use real estate to achieve the highest possible profit potential
3. To reduce any possible risks to the company's reputation.

How can ICT help you achieve these goals? Many solutions providers will confuse things by delivering technology wrapped in their own world view. It is key that you are clear about the areas that require ICT support and what will be of real value.

We can start by dividing solutions into two, managing the buildings and managing the interfaces with staff. By dividing our focus in this way, we have blurred traditional divisions between software and hardware – we have also related these topics to the services that a CRE team needs to provide.

Managing the buildings

There are a number of issues thrown up in this area. Top of the pile are likely to be energy, service reliability and operating costs. From an ICT perspective, the two main classes of application that help in this are – Building (BMS) and Facilities and Property Management systems (FPMS).

The BMS function is central to intelligent buildings concepts. In its broadest implementation it controls, monitors and optimises all building services, such as lighting, heating, security, CCTV and alarm systems, access control, audio-visual systems, ventilation, filtration and climate control, time and attendance control and reporting.

Clearly this type of system is essential in managing a company's energy usage – indeed, up to 70% of most companies' energy usage could be managed this way. They can be expensive to retrofit but with increased energy tax and stakeholder interest in sustainability, expect far more focus on these technologies. Already in the US, some companies are allowing their IT directors, not facilities managers, to take responsibility for managing energy through these systems.

FPMSs range from small-scale systems (that store lease and tenant information), to complex packages that cover many areas. There is an overlap of definitions in this area of software support – each supplier is keen to differentiate itself by offering either a wider range of functionality or deeper specialisation.

We suggest that the following areas are considered in detail by the CRE team before discussing their needs with a supplier:

- *Reporting* – define what essential reports are needed by your team and the Board
- *Functional areas* – compile a detailed account of your team's roles and how this is achieved
- *Features* – highlight if there is a need for export to spreadsheet format and if there is a requirement for remote or mobile access

- *Interfaces* – identify which systems you need to link to such as accounts or geographic information systems.

Managing the interfaces between people and buildings

The issues for workplace productivity are likely to revolve around mobility, collaboration, and knowledge.

Already you can observe an overlap with other line functions, yet there are good reasons why CRE managers should participate actively in these areas. CRE managers need to claim their place in the queue for the aforementioned type of technology. Other departments will make valuable claims to be able to use these tools effectively to save costs and improve margins for the company and a CRE team needs to work out just what is worth fighting for.

For the CRE team, an effective working space is its prime responsibility since it is the face of what they provide. Therefore, it is fairly easy to prioritise the types of IT which will benefit CRE objectives.

The keys to influence are:

1. Knowing your business processes and knowing what is needed by the IT team or a system supplier to meet CRE objectives
2. Keeping control of your knowledge and maintaining access to it by:
 - building and maintaining an asset register
 - using structured services such as *isurv*.

The best CRE managers know the place of ICT within their domain and can work with the others in their company to maximise its benefits. They can also use it to quietly improve their position in the organisation by working more effectively.

This excerpt was taken from the RICS paper, RICS Property in the Economy: Making ICT work for you, by Andrew Waller and Bob Thompson. The full-length paper includes details about the systems highlighted and case studies of how CRE teams can apply technology effectively 'off the shelf' for fast success.

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