

Remit Case Study: Grosvenor – a data cleansing and governance exercise

Sometimes what seems like an ordinary technology project offers a once in a lifetime opportunity to reshape the way you run your business; and for a company with a long, proud history like Grosvenor “once in a lifetime” is a very literal statement.

Property management systems have made the running of large, diverse estates, such as Grosvenor’s, a more efficient and less time-consuming process: but systems are only as good as the information they contain. If errors, inaccuracies or inconsistencies have crept into the dataset, the efficiencies you gain from the software are steadily eroded. If you've been collecting data since the 1750s, you may have a serious challenge on your hands.

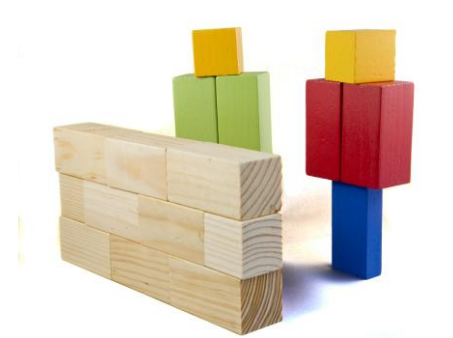
This was exactly the position Grosvenor found itself in last year. The company was moving onto the final phase of a major efficiency project, reshaping the business' teams, processes and working methods. The stumbling block was the variable quality and quantity of the information they were holding on thousands of properties. But a company that’s used to thinking long-term can spot an opportunity.

"We needed a new management system, one that was fit for the modern day," says [Will Bax, Portfolio Director for Grosvenor's Mayfair Estate](#): and they needed accurate, up-to-date data to populate it. Making the most of that meant dealing with their historic archive to make it match their new systems.

They took a long, hard, analytical look at their data: were they collecting the right information about their leases? Was it accurate? And what was the most critical data for them to collect? Dumping inaccurate data from their existing system into the new one would have reduced the hope-for efficiencies of the new system, so assessing the quality of the existing data was a priority.

They took a sample of data, representing about 2% of the portfolio, and looked at how good it was. The result was a mixed bag. The data around managing income appeared to be good, but the details around leases weren't meeting the quality threshold the company had set for itself. It was clear that the company needed to improve its data governance to make the most of its shift to the new software.

Senior management gave the go-ahead for a full data cleanse across the nearly 3000 properties it holds. To hit the timescale already established for migrating to the new property management software, the project had to be run to a very tight deadline, and with a ruthless focus on accuracy - and Grosvenor found the skills it needed in Remit.



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"We needed people with strong data skills and superb project management capabilities," says Bax. Equally, they needed a team who could rapidly scale up over the course of a month, and who could work comfortably with Grosvenor's existing advisors. "In the end, we chose Remit because they have never let us down."

It was a challenging project. The Remit team had to pull together all the surveyors, solicitors and project managers needed to run the project from Grosvenor's retained suppliers and Remit's extensive network of contacts.

"The fact that we were able to do this proves that our model is both scalable and flexible," says Melita Thomas, a partner in Remit.

However, before the team could go to work, Remit needed to establish exactly what data was needed - and in what form. They worked with Grosvenor to identify 40 pieces of critical data and developed a rigorous set of guidelines as to exactly what form that data needed to take. The team also developed a system of quality assurance cross-checks to flag inconsistencies and potential errors, to prevent any early errors becoming compounded.

The data cleansing team, often numbering up to 14 people, worked in Grosvenor offices, in a secure data room. Bax points out that having the project underway within Grosvenor's own offices sent a clear message to the rest of the company that good quality information about the whole of the estate was taken very seriously by the management team - something that would be vital to maintaining the quality of the database once the project was done.

At the peak of the project they were processing around 10 properties per day per person. Over the course of the project, turnaround time for requested documents from the company's archives improved from typically 48 hours to around 5 minutes, saving the client valuable time and supporting swifter, more responsive service and decision-making in future.

The need to get the data cleansing work absolutely accurate while being produced at that rate meant that the project managers put in place regular reviews of the data output, so that problems with any one team's work could quickly be identified and rectified. The system was based on "quality circles", and if a circle's work wasn't hitting the benchmarks, the properties were put straight back into the process.

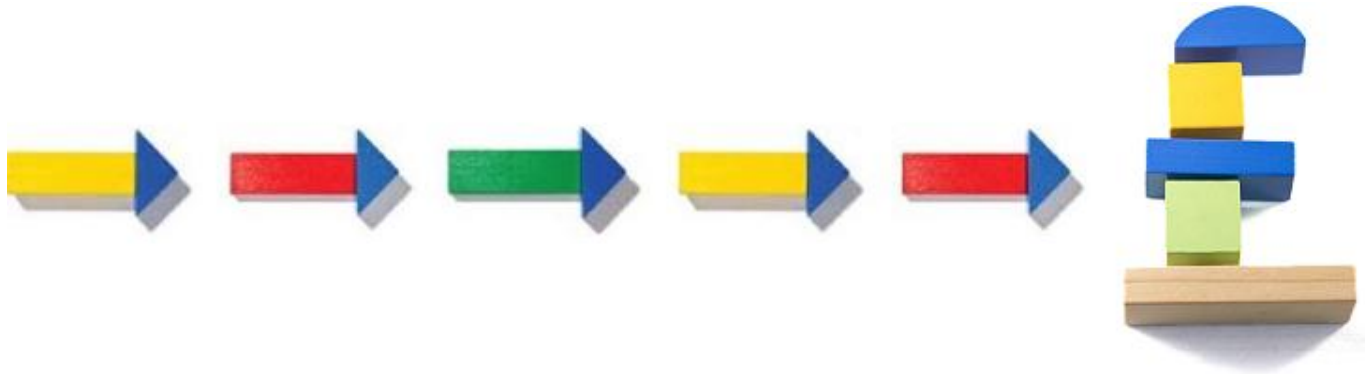
"It was done incredibly efficiently, and with forensic precision," recalls Bax. Parts of the work were eye-opening. The historic natures of the leases - some of them up to a century old threw up interesting quirks emerged, such as breaks granted only on the death of the Prince of Wales, or bans on the playing of the piano at certain hours - certainly not a common clause in an office lease.



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Immediate financial benefits steadily accrued as the project went on, through the identification of back rent issues, and other variances. They also identified some significant amounts of services charges that hadn't been being billed, providing a boost in on-going income from the estate.



Other issues identified included break dates not being captured from the leases into the management system and tenants names not correctly captured when leases were assigned. The team was also able to identify some structural weaknesses in the way they'd been drawing up their leases, which could be rectified in future. The experience of working with thousands of existing leases allowed Remit to develop a data collection process which specified that the order in which data is gathered and input is an important factor in 'right-first-time' accuracy.

Despite the tight time-constraints, Bax says that the Remit team was impressively on time and within budget. The net result of the work was not just a clean, accurate data set for the new property management system. The work allowed for a clear and accurate understanding of exactly what needed to be captured from leases granted in the future - ensuring future data quality was just as important as cleansing the old. Those 40 pieces of information specified by the Remit team need to be accurately recorded in the PMS when new leases are granted. A rigorous set of data guidelines are in place to make sure that what Bax describes as their "shiny new data set" is kept that way into perpetuity - and proving that, with long-term vision and the right advice, a historic company can be on the cutting edge of data efficiency.

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