BEST BUSINESS

HEALTHCARE: PUTTING TECHNOLOGY TO WORK

EDITED BY LESLIE FAUGHNAN

Tony McKeown, IT manager at Cork's Bon Secours Hospital: said the new system brought better control with it   CLARE KEOGH

Andrew Ferguson, Softworks managing director: sought to develop specific solutions

Softworks tackles hard work of hospital rosters

The complexities of rostering a complex mix of staff has challenged hospitals for decades

Based in Bray, Co. Wicklow for nearly 20 years, Softworks is another of Ireland's software mini-multinationals with clients and operations in Ireland, Britain, Canada and a recently-opened office in San Francisco. It also works with partners in Australia and the Middle East. Currently employing 70 people it is continuing to grow in home and overseas markets.

The Softworks portfolio has been developed around HR and staff management and some of the most challenging problems such as complex rostering, time and attendance, skills and training tracking, employee self-service solutions and biometrics for essential logging and access control.

Over time it has developed specific solutions for vertical markets with particular requirements such as healthcare and the public sector, retail, hospitality, manufacturing, pharmaceutical, insurance and others.

"From the very beginning our objective was to bring automation and intelligent systems to the wide range of administrative challenges in managing a workforce," said Andrew Ferguson, Softworks managing director.

"That frees valuable professionals in HR and finance departments to apply their skills to core work. It also brings the usual benefits of business software, greater efficiency and accuracy – which usually translate into some degree of cost saving."

Healthcare is a particular challenge across all staff areas because of the sheer range of specialised skills and job types involved and the 24x365 operation. Softworks is in operation in many of Ireland's largest hospitals such as Beaumont, the National Maternity Hospital , the Coombe Women & Infants University Hospital and the Beacon, in Dublin and the Bon Secours and Mercy University Hospitals, Cork as well as others. "Rostering the correct mix of staff in a large teaching hospital with A&E services is a complex, multi-dimensional matrix that has challenged managements for decades," Ferguson said.

"There are multiple business rules to be complied with, such as the seniority and specialist skills levels of clinicians, on duty and on call, with different shift patterns. Most junior doctors, a key category, change contract hospitals every six months. We have worked in and with this environment for nearly two decades," said Ferguson. "We understand it and our workforce management software can enable managers to deal with manpower planning, rostering and the inevitable changes, usually in tight time scales."

But those HR challenges on the ground, while utterly important and practical every day, can obscure the bigger picture, Ferguson said. "Labour is the biggest single overhead across healthcare, often the dominant single area of costs of any kind. So employee time is the most valuable and costly resource in managing any healthcare facility or service.

'What we have gained is better rostering'

"In Ireland today, the pressures on the health service are a matter of daily public discussion and concern. Our modest contribution is software that can help manage that as efficiently as possible."

The Bon Secours hospital in Cork has been using the Softworks solution to manage rostering and time and attendance of its 1,100 staff for just over three years. "We worked with Softworks to develop a system to meet our specific needs and some of our inherited complexities," said Tony McKeown, the Bon Secours IT manager. "We have, for example, just over 600 rostering schedules and 286 different shift patterns which have to be dovetailed at any given time of day or night."

"On the one hand we did not attempt to change those complex patterns but designed and built the system to deal with them," McKeown said. "On the other hand, one innovation that contributed enormously to efficiency and accuracy was that all staff without exception, from senior managements to part-time cleaners, log on and off using our BiRD system. That was our own term for the Biometric Registration Devices now familiar and comfortable and the subject of an infinite variety of puns. One key point is that everyone recognised from the beginning that it was universally fair and accurate."

The Bon Secours system and its BiRD component is still, to McKeown's knowledge, the only such all-staff log-on/off time and attendance system in any major Irish hospital.

"Of course that is only the visible part of the system. What we have gained is better rostering, better control, comprehensive records, better reports and the functionality to make changes-or to test if proposed changes would work. Financially it's probably neutral in terms of direct costs, but the benefits in enhanced payroll, rostering and time management effectiveness are certainly tangible" he said.