

Success Story: Far North District Council



The Far North District Council is in the most northern part of New Zealand. Bordering the Kaipara and Whangarei districts, it is the largest of the Northland Region's three territorial authorities and stretches from North Cape and Cape Reinga in the north to the Bay of Islands, the Hokianga, and Kaikohe further south. The council is responsible for establishing policies and strategies that determine its overall direction, and these are implemented by a chief executive and 360 council staff members. A mayor and nine councillors represent the district's wards.

The Challenge

When the Far North District Council began its search in 2017 for a new performance management system, it had already clearly identified the key reasons for change and made the decision to move from a paper-based process to a cloud-based on-line system.

The council's Talent and Development Manager, Mike Boyd, was responsible for sourcing a performance management system that best met the council's requirements. He also managed the implementation process and subsequent staff training. He says the need for change was driven largely by the council's desire to transform its manual, labour-intensive annual performance review process into a significantly more dynamic system. The new system needed to be easy



“If you are looking at simply replacing a paper-based performance management system with an online one to reduce paperwork, you are completely missing the point. The Mariner7 system is not about putting documents onto a screen – it will enable your people to do things they cannot do in a paper-based system and add significant value to the overall performance of the organisation.”

Mike Boyd

Talent and Development Manager, Far North District Council

to administer and to capture informative and valuable online conversations between staff and their managers throughout the year. It also needed to have a no-surprises annual review.

“Under the old system, when the time for an annual review came round – usually at the end of the financial year – it was often considered as a box-ticking exercise by managers, team leaders and the staff being reviewed, and was seen by many as an impediment to business as usual.”

People often struggled to recall the process from one year to the next and to find year-old paperwork. Managers and team leaders frequently had to spend time reconfiguring the previous review’s format. A lack of enthusiasm surrounding the process meant the review was often late and, when it did eventually happen, conversations tended to begin with an apology instead of being upbeat from the get-go.

Recognising the need for change, in early May 2017 the council requested presentations of performance review systems from nine companies. Evaluators were appointed to rate each presentation, and selection criteria were developed for the evaluators to rate information fairly. As well as the overall cost being a factor, selection criteria included, but were not limited to, the provider’s level of support; the system’s visual appeal and ease of use; the provider and system’s fitness for purpose; and the system’s flexibility.

The Solution

The Mariner7 Performance Review System was selected for several reasons, though Mike says that the high-quality level of ongoing support that Mariner7 could provide was a significant factor. The provider’s level of support criterion had been weighted highly and Mariner7

displayed an implicit understanding of the need for speed and clarity, and a willingness to go the extra mile when support was needed.

Evaluators also regarded the Mariner7 system as visually appealing and intuitive to use. The council recognised that these would be critical factors in bedding in the new system, as it was more likely users would make the most of the system if it looked and felt easy to use from the very first time people interacted with it.

The system’s flexibility, its metrics for measuring and reporting, and the ease with which add-ons and links – such as to training platforms – could be made were also factors that put Mariner7 ahead of the eight other competing providers.

Staff members’ goals, KPIs and a Development Plan could be set within Mariner7, and the Development Plan could be linked easily to the goals and KPIs. Importantly, online conversations about them could be held throughout the year and logged, making it easy to retrieve and include them in the next annual review.

The Result

“The negative stigma that was attached to performance reviews at the Far North District Council has changed, and that’s largely because of the online capabilities we have now,” says Mike Boyd.

The council’s objective for 100 per cent of its fulltime employees to use Mariner7 for their online performance management tool is being met. Performance management has become an easy, everyday task that is providing staff members with a pathway for feedback and support.

Mike believes the achievements are due to numerous factors including the ease with which the system can be used and personalised; the



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training provided to all staff; the system’s visual appeal; and the delivery of Mariner7’s promise of excellent support.

“In the early stages, when small things needed to be resolved, the Mariner7 team could fix most of them within an hour – and that’s never tailed off.”

Another key contributor to the willingness of the council’s staff to use Mariner7 is the system’s capability for staff and their managers to have valuable online performance conversations between one annual review and the next.

For example, a staff member may wish to record an achievement such as reaching a goal or KPI, or they may want to inform their team leader that they are struggling with managing their people or worried about meeting a budget. Instead of talking about the matter retrospectively at the annual review as they would have under the old manual system, the employee now simply clicks Mariner7’s Catch Up tool to initiate an instant online, forward-thinking conversation with their team leader or manager.

The conversations, which the manager or team leader can also initiate, are stored in the employee’s portal along with their KPIs, goals and personal Development Plan. Managers and team leaders can track progress and all relevant documents and conversations can be easily retrieved for the annual performance review.

The council’s cascade model for KPIs is reflected within its Mariner7 system, providing many staff with access to the KPIs of others on the same level as well as to those on levels below and on one level above. The transparency provides snapshots for employees on how they contribute to other areas of council and to council as a whole. It also makes it more likely that staff members will align their KPIs with the council’s main policies and strategies.

The ability of all people leaders to see the real time status of the performance and development activities of their teams is a very powerful

function of Mariner7. Available as a dashboard or spreadsheet, this accurate view of progress was virtually impossible to achieve when Council staff were using a paper based system.

What staff say about Mariner7

Far North District Council staff members embraced Mariner7 from the outset and continue to provide positive feedback. Mike says that, in particular, they consider the system to be an excellent way to record performance conversations.

“When they started using it, they said it was surprisingly easy and that it actually supported their performance conversation rather than getting in the way. Managers and team leaders said the performance review process had become less intrusive and that it was now much easier to transition from one financial year to the next.”

Continuous improvement

“Mariner7 has been extremely supportive, flexible and responsive. They have been so transparent in our partnership with them,” says Mike. “I don’t view them as a service provider – rather, it’s an enterprise relationship where I regularly look at where we want to go in the future and what part Mariner7 can play in that.”

In 2019, the Far North District Council asked Mariner7 to provide staff with the ability to link their Development Plans with Percipio, a comprehensive online learning experience platform that provides access to hundreds of regularly updated learning paths.

Today, staff who identify the need to train in a particular area of expertise can register, via Mariner7, for a digital learning programme on the Percipio platform. Throughout the programme, they can record comments about each session in their portal, which their manager is able to promptly access and respond to.