

case study:
STUDENT LOANS COMPANY

Discover how the Student Loans Company achieved considerable process and cost efficiencies through optimal use of the assyst CMDB and latest version functionality

Axios Systems lends an ITSM hand to the Student Loans Company

The Student Loans Company (SLC) is a public sector organisation providing government-funded loans and grants to students throughout the United Kingdom. It is responsible therefore, in partnership with local authorities in England and Wales, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland, the Education and Library Boards in Northern Ireland, colleges and universities throughout the UK, and HM Revenue & Customs, for the administration of financial services to students. Additionally, the SLC manages the collection of repayments from those no longer in higher education.

The SLC is based in Glasgow and employs over 1,300 staff. It aims to provide a sympathetic, helpful and quality service to over three million customers, 700 universities and colleges, and a further 160 award agencies. The SLC faces an enormous task in terms of its communication function: each year it handles some three million telephone calls and issues almost nine million items of mail on behalf of the company and the local education authorities. Customer advisers and administrators handle thousands of enquiries each week from borrowers and partner organisations who require more detailed information than can be supplied by the automated procedures. Despite the extensive size and scope of its activities, SLC consistently achieves a high order of customer satisfaction in independent monthly surveys, averaging in the order of 93% 'good' or 'excellent' ratings.

The Challenge

Having undergone considerable growth as an organisation, SLC needed to improve the way it managed its IT environment with regards to visibility and the management of its resources. The company needed to rebuild its outdated database of IT assets, improve performance against its Service Level Agreements (SLAs) to users through better call resolution and service, increase user confidence in IT and establish processes to improve the management of IT within the organisation.

Business Value

SLC is using *assyst* by Axios Systems to deliver the following IT Service Management benefits:

- Restructured and refreshed Configuration Management Database (CMDB) to provide a logical and accurate view of its IT assets
- Upgrade to latest version of *assyst*, which expanded the system to include new functionality such as Lotus Notes Identifier
- Improved reporting capabilities, which allows better tracking of SLAs, cross-charging services and customer services
- Smart Mail functionality, which enhances efficiency and user experience through sophisticated, automated e-mail communication



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ICT Infrastructure Incident Manager



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Background

Over the last five years, SLC has been using Axios Systems' assyst solution, but had taken the decision to open it up to a large pool of people to input data with a certain lack of enforced processes and administration rights. As a result the data held in the systems had become unreliable. Data duplication, inconsistent entry methods and the use of an old version of the software meant the system had become cumbersome, under-utilised and therefore inefficient.

The fact that the IT team did not have a single version of the truth in terms of its IT assets had an inevitable knock-on effect on costs, service levels, staff perception and end user satisfaction.

As part of SLC's continual assessment of strategic IT systems and processes, the technology department recognised that its ITSM was in need of an action programme to ensure it was able to further support and enhance the IT service provision to the organisation. SLC therefore initiated a six-month project to improve its ITSM services.

The starting point was not the software upgrade, but the underlying data quality, which the team recognised as the biggest issue. The company felt it wasn't using the assyst solution to its full potential and needed to feed it with better data to provide a better service to staff.

Paul Clugston, ICT Infrastructure Incident Manager at SLC, said, “We liked the assyst solution but, because we had data quality challenges, the service and user experience was not as good as it should have been. We knew that by improving the data we would improve the adoption and perception of ITSM within the business.”

Starting at the core: the database

Initially, the project team undertook internal interviews and meetings in the IT department to investigate the issues, requirements and available resources. They also took the opportunity to re-educate staff that the software as such wasn't the issue, but the underlying data, and that this would be addressed in this project.

Clugston and his team put in place a detailed plan and timeline to rebuild and cleanse the database, and then upgrade to the latest version of assyst to benefit from new, additional functionality.

Next they addressed the Configuration Management within assyst. The team re-designed the assyst product structure, which over the years had become out of synch with the reality in this growing organisation. Axios Systems provided SLC with 'starter' licences of the latest version to set this up on a separate server in a test environment. This allowed the re-structure to be developed without affecting the ongoing day-to-day business.

“Axios giving us the software for testing and development meant we could continue to offer a service and at the same time develop and check our work properly. At the end we invited an Axios Consultant to review and provide any additional recommendations to our configuration and set-up. This way we could utilise the time we had with the consultant to the maximum,” explained Clugston. Just before Go-Live with the new product structure and version, the team

completed a comprehensive audit of all IT assets, which was made up of automated asset tracking, analysis of change records and a physical 'walk-around' inventory by the Configuration Manager. As a result, the ITSM team now boasts a clean and up-to-date database of over 6,000 assets and 1,500 contact users across its four sites.

“The benefits resulting from the database clean-up are considerable,” Alan Robertson, Service Desk Analyst at SLC remarked. “Previously, IT staff would have to walk to the office floors taking notes on IT resources, which was time-consuming, costly and inefficient. Now we can find reliable asset information in seconds. This has freed up an enormous amount of time, which can be spent on more productive tasks.”

In addition to the improvements to structure and data, the team conducted internal training to ensure the data quality will be maintained going forward and achieve maximum buy-in for the new system. This has helped greatly with the smooth adoption of the new system and overall staff enthusiasm over the benefits achieved in only six months.

“We always knew assyst was a very powerful solution and more than capable of meeting our needs. Now, with clean data and better processes in place, the improvements are obvious to everybody,” Robertson concluded.

Going further: additional functionality

Along with the improved CMDB, SLC also saw significant benefits in other areas of the upgraded solution. One of the most visible was in the area of reporting. During the interview process the team found out which reports were required and, with the help of an Axios consultant, wrote a series of customised reports and trained a Reports Administrator. Now, assyst provides reports based on calls, department and fix time rates among many others.

“Our reporting now gives the team full visibility of all aspects of our Service Desk operations. It allows us to be proactive in tracking for trends so that we can catch any issues before they escalate. We can also now create our new reports really easily and this means we are able to maximise all the functionality of the solution,” said Clugston.

Another very useful feature of the new version of assyst is the Lotus Notes Identifier which provides hyperlinks to e-mails within assyst so that searching for and importing specific attachments and e-mails is much easier and quicker.

The introduction of Smart Mail, an assyst functionality that allows sending templated e-mails using values gathered in assyst, has also had a major impact in terms of improved efficiency and customer experience. SLC now sends automated e-mails to end users keeping them informed about the incident status and, after resolution, asking them to confirm that they are happy for the call to be closed. In addition, automated e-mail within the IT team alerts to potential SLA breaches by means of escalation, thus further improving visibility of overall call status.

“We thought Smart Mail would be a big additional project, but Axios showed us the functionality during a one-day training session and by the end of it we were able to deploy it ourselves. We like how professional it looks and how it overcomes one of our biggest barriers, user adoption and experience of ITSM at the company. It supports SLA tracking and we know that customer service has improved,” continued Clugston. ■

Benefits

- Restructured and refreshed CMDB providing logical and accurate view of IT assets
- Upgrade to latest version of assyst with expanded functionality
- Improved reporting capabilities for SLA tracking, cross-charging and customer services
- Sophisticated, automated e-mail communication via Smart Mail

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The Future

The Student Loans Company now plans to further develop its system by introducing an automated customer satisfaction survey via Smart Mail and the introduction of an intelligent knowledgebase.

Furthermore, the team is interested in **assystNET**, a web-based self service companion product, as a way of allowing end-users to log and monitor their own calls and allow IT staff to focus on more strategic projects. The company is also looking at **assystDiscovery** to integrate into its Centennial asset tracking solution and **assystMobile** for remote access.

“We now have an ITSM solution that fulfils all our needs. We have rebuilt our CMDB and put in place processes that allow our IT staff to ensure excellent performance against SLAs. There is no doubt that customer service has improved, and equally important is the confidence that the staff have gained in IT and the solution itself,” concluded Clugston.



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“The assyst solution has acted as the key enabler for significant six figure financial savings year on year due to its ability to track assets, their specification and suitability for re-use.”



“What really clinched the business for Axios was the professionalism of its consultants.”



“The key in selecting Axios was their in-depth knowledge of ITIL in conjunction with their award-winning toolset.”



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