

Sapphire Case Study: Art Council of Wales



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Helen Davies, Arts Council of Wales

SUNSYSTEMS

Arts Council of Wales - Live in Eight Weeks with SunSystems The Arts Council of Wales (ACW) was created in 1994 by Royal Charter to help develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts in Wales, and to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public. The Welsh Assembly Government provides ACW with money to fund the arts in Wales and, as an Assembly Sponsored Public Body, ACW is responsible to the Welsh Assembly Government for the way this money is spent. ACW is also the distributor of Lottery money for the arts in Wales which is allocated by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, based in London.

The ACW first recognized the need for a new financial management system when they were faced by a number of challenges that they were unable to resolve through their existing accounting solution. This included the demand for a more flexible reporting and analysis solution to help support the business going forward, and the need to gain better control over key elements of the finance operation which comprised:

- The Collectorplan (a scheme providing interest-free loans to members of the public wishing to purchase works of art)
- Artists Loan Accounting
- Grant Accounting
- Overhead apportionment
- Cash analysis

Helen Davies, an accountant at the ACW for the past two and a half years, and a member of the project team, takes up the story, "the poor reporting and inflexibility of the incumbent system added up to a significant amount of time wasted on tasks such as rekeying and rechecking data - time we knew would be better spent on providing value-added tasks such as financial analysis and operational management and reporting".

In late 2003, funding was granted to address these problems through implementing a new solution at the ACW. To begin the search, Helen and her team attended Softworld - a finance software showcase exhibition held twice a year in London and Birmingham. Helen comments "the Softworld Exhibition was very enlightening. Accounting systems had moved on quite a bit since we last looked at the market and Softworld gave us the ideal forum to see a number of different packages all under one roof".

During the exhibition Helen took note that there were two very distinct kinds of system on the marketplace "there were the combined-ledger solutions offered by products such as SunSystems, plus a range of derivative systems - modular in design - which needed to be 'assembled' to make one solution".

On returning from Softworld, Helen created a shortlist of products for the team to examine in more detail. She goes on to say "the combined-ledger setup offered by solutions such as SunSystems appeared to offer a number of major benefits - a key one being that you are never out of balance. With the modular systems, and although



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integration is available, the reality is that disconnection may occur - leaving us open to having to run control accounts, rekeying data and wasting time in looking for the errors".

Once the initial investigation phase was completed, Helen presented the ACW's Director of four different products at which to take a closer look. Helen and the project team then issued a Statement of Requirements to each of the shortlisted suppliers which, upon completion, were duly assessed for suitability and followed in short order by live presentations of the solutions to the project team at the ACW's offices in Cardiff.

During the selection process, the ACW undertook some onsite reference visits to see some real-life product implementations in action, and to discover a little more about how the suppliers interacted with their customers. Helen says, "the reference sites given to us by Sapphire proved to be very informative, and we learnt a great deal about what Sapphire's clients felt about them as a business partner. This helped considerably by providing independent assurance that Sapphire would make a good solution provider for us. In fact, it was a combination of these positive references, together with a well-constructed response to our Statement of Requirements and their demonstration showing a good understanding of our business needs that led to our decision that Sapphire was the right organization to select".

With both the solution and the supplier decided upon, it was time to focus on getting everything up and running. Helen tells us, "We had a very tight implementation timeframe - just eight weeks to have the system implemented, the data transferred and everyone trained and ready to go. We achieved this through creating a detailed project and design plan that marked out each of the milestones to ensure that we kept on track"

To help with the implementation, the ACW were assisted by one of Sapphire's experienced SunSystems consultants. Helen tells us "We found the help given by Sapphire's consultant invaluable. He worked incredibly hard to make sure that each milestone was achieved in good time and his experience in having 'done it all before' made sure that we could anticipate any obstacles as they arose". One of the trickiest milestones that the ACW needed to overcome was that of the new Loans Scheme functionality. Helen says "as the Loan Scheme had never been computerized before, we didn't have any live data to test.

Fortunately, Sapphire were able to overcome any potential problems by first creating a training environment that allowed us to run parallel with the live implementation for a month – this helped us to address any problems before they became an issue". The result: a fully functional SunSystems implementation was delivered within eight weeks: on time, and as promised.

Now that the ACW are working with SunSystems there have been a number of noticeable improvements which include:-

- A reduction in the amount of rekeying and data entry by some 15%
- The combined-ledger set-up giving added confidence in the numbers
- The strong reporting and analysis capabilities – giving greater insight into the performance of the organization
- The Account Inquiry module - allowing the ACW to manipulate financial information in a familiar Excel environment - to reduce the learning curve



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SUNSYSTEMS

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On commenting on Sapphire's post-implementation support Helen says "we are finding that Sapphire is a very professional organization to work with - our Account Manager ensures that we are kept up-to-date with everything we need to know and the Support Team is on-hand to provide us with excellent advice and support whenever it's needed. The Sapphire Online Support System is also available 24 hours a day and gives us a great knowledge-base to find help, advice and information on SunSystems".

Helen concludes: "SunSystems has delivered precisely what we need to manage our finance operations more efficiently - and we feel that our decision to work with Sapphire will help us to ensure the continuing success of SunSystems within ACW. There is still more room to develop the solution further and, with Sapphire's help, we look forward to increasing the scope of the system to deliver even more added benefit to the organization". SunSystems flexible accounting and reporting structure would allow us to implement the system on a small scale and then add account codes and structure".