

Chapter 6

Prison Service

6.1 Human Resource Management System

Background

Delivering Better Government, published in May 1996, stated that the modernisation agenda in the Civil Service needed to be supported by changes in Human Resource (HR) Management policy and practices.

The actions required to give effect to Delivering Better Government called for the roll-out of modern, IT based Human Resource Management Systems (HRMS) in individual Departments/Offices across the Civil Service to provide a platform for improved service and strategic re-orientation of the HR function.

The benefits of the new systems were expected to include

- enhanced management information and reporting, with a greater emphasis on strategic HR issues
- greater efficiency in administration and improved service to staff
- an integrated system for both personnel administration and training/development
- interfaces to other systems such as payroll.

It was also expected that improved HRMS would open up the possibility of devolving certain aspects of HR to line managers.

The Department of Finance's Centre for Management and Organisation Development (CMOD) took the lead in centrally acquiring a well known Human Resource software package as the basis for strategic human resource management in the Civil Service and as a replacement for the existing Personnel Administration System (PAS) which had been in use for many years in most Departments/Offices. The chosen package was customised for use in Government Departments and Offices and piloted in the Department of Social and Family Affairs and Office of the Revenue Commissioners.

CMOD's main responsibilities were to maintain a standard template for the new system, coordinate maintenance of the common interfaces, respond to functional and technical support queries and issues as second level support, manage and control HRMS customisations and coordinate upgrades of the software.

Departments and Offices would be responsible for implementing, integrating, training, funding, maintaining and operating the new HR systems.

Coordinated Approach to Implementation

CMOD provided a standard Request for Tender (RFT) document to assist Departments and Offices in procuring an implementation partner to bring the new system into operation. The RFT, which included a standard Specification of Requirements, allowed each Department/Office the flexibility to define its own particular needs and to deal with issues arising from systems already in operation in Departments/Offices.

Justice Group Implementation

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform decided, with the objective of achieving significant economies of scale, to seek a single supplier to implement the system for its five main entities, the Department itself, the Prison Service, the Courts Service, the Land Registry and Registry of Deeds and the Legal Aid Board.

Following a tender competition in late 2002, the Department engaged a leading consultancy firm as its implementing partner for the project.

HRMS in the Irish Prison Service

An audit review by my staff of implementation of the system in the Justice Group noted that notwithstanding significant payments to the consultants and the expenditure of considerable time and effort by staff, use of the new system was discontinued in the Prison Service in December 2004.

The Prison Service was the only one of the five organisations in the Justice Group not to be a user of the existing PAS system widely in use across the Civil Service before commencement of this project. The Prison Service used a personnel system based on a particular database package. Implementation of the new HRMS system commenced on a phased basis in the Prison Service in September 2003. By February 2004 Governors in prisons where the system had not been implemented decided to continue to use the old system rather than migrate to HRMS because of concerns raised that the new system did not meet the Prison Service business needs, required significant additional administration time to operate, and did not provide accurate management information. An internal Prison Service committee was set up to review the position and in September 2004 the Prison Service notified CMOD of its intention to withdraw from the HRMS. Formal notice of non-renewal of licences was sent to CMOD in December 2004.

The Prison Service ceased to use the new system on 1 December 2004, subsequently re-instating the old system, which required re-input of personnel records that had been migrated to HRMS.

Audit Concern

As the decision of the Prison Service to pull out of the HRMS project gave rise to significant nugatory expenditure and may have been indicative of either a failure by the project management to properly evaluate the needs of the Prison Service, or alternatively a lack of commitment in making the chosen system work, I sought the Accounting Officer's views.

Accounting Officer's Response

General

The Accounting Officer in his response stated that the Prison Service is a branch of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and operates from sixteen prisons and five other locations, including its headquarters in Clondalkin. At the time of the introduction of the HRMS in September 2003 there were eighteen prisons, and the system was implemented in all of them at that time.

The great majority (approximately 3,200 out of 3,350) of staff in the Prison Service belong to grades unique to the Prisons, resulting in a set of business needs that are particular to the Prison Service, which include dealing with staff that work irregular hours, injuries on duty, compensation for injuries, the

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generation of sick leave reports which take into account the different work patterns of Prison Officers, letters for staff and the withdrawal of paid sick leave. This specialised set of requirements has made the Prison Service's experience with HRMS different from that in other agencies where the system has been implemented. In effect, the Prison Service is a seven day-24 hour a day organisation and its HR activities are geared on a "round-the clock" basis. The failure of the system customised to meet these particular requirements led to the Prison Service's decision to discontinue its use.

Given the unique needs of the Prison Service, work is underway to consider how best to meet current and future needs, with external facilitation. A decision will then be taken as to whether any off-the-shelf package would be suitable or whether the Prison Service requirements demand a custom built programme.

Response to Specific Queries

- *How much did implementation in the Justice Group cost?*

The Accounting Officer informed me that the total cost of implementing HRMS in the Department's Head Office, the Land Registry, the Legal Aid Board, the Courts Service and the Prison Service was €1.06 million. Table 20 gives an apportionment of these costs. The amount attributable to the aborted HRMS in the Prison Service was €450,545.

Table 20

	Justice Headquarters €	Prison Service €	Courts Service €	Land Registry and Registry of Deeds €	Legal Aid Board €	Total €
Pre Implementation	197,091	248,420	78,075	49,684	29,101	
Implementation/Consultancy	118,034	174,308	56,775	38,855	21,419	
Implementation Costs	12,311	27,817	5,943	3,821	2,123	
Total	327,436	450,545	140,793	92,360	52,643	1,063,777

He also indicated that the cost of re-keying information in the prisons was unlikely to exceed €5,000. The internal staff costs associated with implementing the system in the Group are approximately €26,000.

- *Why were the specific needs of the Prison Service not recognized and factored into the implementation prior to the issue of the RFT?*

In reply the Accounting Officer pointed out that while there was an awareness of the special business needs that might apply in the prisons it was decided to go for one singular implementation. It was likely that the Group would get economies of scale from going this route in terms of a cheaper overall implementation contract, and this proved to be the case. Secondly it gave the Group more clout in the market as a bigger and more lucrative implementation client and therefore more likely to attract 'serious' players. Thirdly there were considerable additional synergies on the technical level, in particular the idea of using a common server as opposed to setting up a separate one in each organisation.

The RFT sought an implementation partner for the basic HRMS available to the Civil Service. It was felt that individual agencies could then build their own modifications to fill any gaps. As it turned out, this approach did not work out for the Prison Service. The extra functionality required was extensive, there was little scope for upgrading/modifying the system itself, and any option taken would have required a lot of time.

Some of the difficulties with the RFT, from a Prisons perspective, were due to changeover of staff as the Prison Service moved to Clondalkin and the loss of corporate knowledge that accompanied it. New work practices were adopted to deal with these difficulties, but these did not adequately meet the needs of prison users. HRMS managed to provide much of the functionality of the existing software system, but was noticeably weaker than the old system in some of the key areas used by prisons. A HR system in a more 'finished' form would have been more well received by prison users, as from their perspective HRMS was a significant step backwards. This resulted in a low level of user acceptance across prisons.

He indicated that a standard set of reports when configured for Prison Service use proved cumbersome and untrustworthy. As a result, Clerks in prisons were often unable to fulfil their reporting requirements to their Governors.

Since the Justice implementation, a further set of 30 Civil Service reports were developed by CMOD, but only a small proportion of them provided any information. Furthermore, they did not work at all unless exported into a report writing package that could not be used in the Prison Service for security reasons. The Accounting Officer added that he understood that Prison Service was not unique in having difficulties with the system's capacity to provide satisfactory reports.

A further difficulty arose in relation to the Prison Service's requirement to provide sick leave advice letters to staff (as a result of a High Court ruling) and extra cost was incurred to build in letter production functionality. The Prison Service was presented with two options at the time, one was for five days' effort by the consultant, and the other for twenty days' effort, both at the daily rate of €990. The Prison Service opted for the cheaper of the two options.

- *Was adequate training provided?*

He informed me that Key Functional Users (KFUs) in the Prison Service were used to train the clerks of the prisons. Each clerk was given a half days training to learn how to input sick leave, print letters and see sick leave reports, using training manuals designed by the KFUs and the consultants. The clerks made numerous complaints about the system itself at this stage, but the KFUs covered all of the training areas with each of the clerks, as well as providing a considerable amount of "hand-holding" after the system went live.

The consultants did not include report writing training during the main implementation in any agency to the knowledge of the Accounting Officer. The rationale offered by the consultants at the time was that they felt it was better for agencies to go live with the system and get a feel for use of the system first before coming back for training in report writing. The consultants also felt that report writing training was not relevant to all end users but only to the KFUs.

- *What acceptance tests were performed to ensure delivery of a fully operational system?*

The five agencies of the Justice Group fully loaded current personal and sick leave information onto a test version of the HRMS database in order to test it. In the Prison Service tests, post go-live, the differences between HRMS and the old system were limited and for the most part due to different features of the new system. However there were difficulties with some documentation provided by the supplier.

The Accounting Officer pointed out that problems emerged with system response times depending on local infrastructural conditions in the 18 different Prison Service sites. As the HRMS is based on a web browser, there is no way around this except ensuring fast connection speeds at all stages. The Prison Service has since spent in the region of €150,000 upgrading infrastructure in the larger prisons. This requirement would continue to exist in the context of a new shared services solution provided by CMOD.

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Was the assistance and guidance given by CMOD appropriate for the implementation of HRMS in the Justice Group as a whole?

The Accounting Officer stated that at the time of the Justice Group project, it was CMOD's position that each Department look after their own individual implementation. However, CMOD had a representative on the Justice Group Project Board and gave input as appropriate during the course of implementing HRMS.

As many of the Prison Service's difficulties arose post-implementation there is no particular evidence to suggest that CMOD was aware of the problem until after the go-live date.

When contacted about Prison Service's problems with HRMS, CMOD was of the view that the Prison Service was just one organisation in 17, and was not given any particular priority, despite the difficulties being experienced, though it could be argued that the Prison Service represented 10% of the staff in the Civil Service on HRMS.

In June 2004, after the prisons had discontinued use of HRMS, CMOD offered to assist in testing reports, but did not in fact do so, due to other work demands.

It could also be said that CMOD did not undertake any specific body of work to aid the Prison Service in this matter.

In summary, CMOD may have been constrained by the lack of resources available to them in providing support to all of the 13 Civil Service implementation projects, many taking place simultaneously. Learning from this process has since resulted in a change of approach to HRMS implementations for new users with a move to a common implementation.

Finally, Justice and the Prison Service were severely constrained in adapting the chosen system. The common HRMS system was customised for the Civil Service based on the Social Welfare and Revenue experience. The CMOD rationale of a common system across the service implied that modifications by users would interfere with future upgrades etc. so were not encouraged. The Prison Service environment, and consequently its IT needs, varies considerably from the broader Civil Service.

Summary Observations by the Accounting Officer

The Accounting Officer said that while there clearly were issues with HRMS in the Prison Service that ultimately led to its withdrawal, it would not be accurate to say that the other four entities in the Justice Group experienced anything like the same level of difficulties. That said, there were teething problems with HRMS across the Justice Group as end users acclimatised and got used to the new system. He said there is nothing unusual about this as many end users to most new IT systems generally experience similar difficulties in adapting to new processes and technical configurations. While the other users in the Justice Group had less technical requirements and quickly came to terms with the new system, the unique requirements pertaining to the Prison Service were such that a long term commitment was not a viable option. He added that with the benefit of hindsight, it might have been preferable had the Prison Service decided not to go along as part of the Justice Group on the basis that its requirements were so fundamentally different to the generality of needs across the Civil Service, that any enhancements of a substantive nature post implementation would have been difficult, and prohibitively costly, to implement.

In summary, his Department had little option but to go along with HRMS as CMOD had decided to discontinue supporting enhancements on the existing PAS system. While the HRMS system has worked well in most of the Department's agencies, the experience in the Prison Service is that system does not meet the particular requirements there. The fact that the Prisons operate from 18 different locations, on a 24 hour/7 day per week basis with a range of atypical attendance patterns and unusual arrangements in relation to sick leave requirements etc, meant that a fully integrated HRMS system was always going to be difficult to achieve. Moreover, the overall situation in the Prison Service has also been exacerbated by the industrial relations scene in recent years including the need to reduce the substantial overtime bill.

He assured me that his Department had learned a very considerable lesson from its experiences with HRMS. Any further IT projects on a cross-agency basis, will need to be critically examined - irrespective of the demands or where they are coming from - to ensure that they can meet the requirements of the different entities involved.

Views of the Department of Finance

In light of the comments of the Accounting Officer, I asked the Department of Finance for its observations on the role of CMOD in the matter.

The Accounting Officer of the Department of Finance informed me that he believed that CMOD had met its obligations as regards the maintenance of a standard template for the new HR Management System, co-ordination of the maintenance of the common interfaces, responding to functional and technical support queries and managing and controlling HRMS customisations and co-ordinated upgrades of the product.

Ownership remained with Departments and Offices and ultimately it was their responsibility to allocate the appropriate resources to maintain and manage their instance of the HRMS software and also to provide day-to-day support of the system.

With reference to the comments of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, he made the following points

- While the Prison Service implementation took place in late 2003, his Department was unaware of the Prison Service problems until June 2004. CMOD were not notified of the decision to discontinue use of HRMS until the end of November 2004.
- Although some organisations experienced problems with the standard reports issued with the template, they could alter these to meet their specific requirements and many did so. CMOD also prepared 30 additional general-purpose reports for civil service application in the first quarter of 2004 and made them made available to the Justice Group at that time. They could be further refined or extended to meet particular requirements. This set of reports continues to be widely used, including use by non-HR staff in devolved locations.
- It was never envisaged that the original reports, or the additional set of 30, would be sufficient to meet all the needs of Departments or Offices. CMOD expected that Departments and Offices would develop further reports using the querying/reporting facilities provided by the HRMS.
- The CMOD set of reports does not require an export to an additional report-writing package as they can be run successfully within the HRMS application. However, the additional report-writing package referred to is in widespread use both within the civil service and worldwide. CMOD are

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aware of HRMS implementations that have over 100 reports, many of which are specific to their own needs, and would have been written in-house.

- In regard to the responsiveness of the system, CMOD do not agree with the Prison Service view as they consider that it would have been open to the Justice IT Unit to have provided more processing capacity if there had been a significant and persistent problem with running queries/reports. CMOD would also like to state that badly written queries/reports can have an adverse impact on system performance.
- CMOD could not accept any responsibility for network infrastructure deficiencies in the Prison Service and note that the HRMS desktop uses a web browser that requires far less network capacity than, for example, e-mail, word-processing, and older shared file databases.
- The production and content of letters from the system was always a matter for each individual Department/Office.
- CMOD have on many occasions provided HRMS assistance to the other Justice sites by phone, by e-mail and through on-site assistance. The Prison Service was provided specific assistance by phone and e-mail. Offers of support on report writing were made at a meeting with the Prison Service in June 2004 and at a meeting with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in September 2004, but these were not taken up.
- Offers by CMOD to make site visits to the Prison Service offices were also not taken up.
- CMOD were unaware of any instance where a lack of resources caused it not to respond to the Prison Service calls for assistance and support.

As a result of the experience of the 13 implementations of the HRMS, and following on from a CMOD study of shared services, the Civil Service HR community have used a private sector partner to implement the latest upgraded version of the HRMS. This will be a single implementation for the whole of the Civil Service and will eliminate the repetitive work and the multiplicity of computing resources associated with an individual approach to the implementations.