CMap

GRIMSHAW

> "Architects should be doing things that make the world a better place. But in order to do those things, you have to know the business can support it.

Neil Boyde, Chief Financial Officer

Maintaining Creative Freedom

Grimshaw are a world-famous architectural practice with offices around the globe. They employ over 600 staff in locations such as London, New York, Doha, Melbourne, Dubai and Kuala Lumpur.

On top of that, they've won more awards than we could possibly list here, and have a huge range of instantly-recognisable projects under their belt. Their most impressive ones include the Eden Project, Wimbledon's Court No. 1 and Shanghai's Disney Resort, Tomorrowland.

But in order to pursue those career defining projects, Grimshaw need to ensure their bottom line is healthy. Doing so gives them the headroom to go after constructions that make people sit up and take notice.

When their CFO Neil Boyde first joined the firm it was evidently doing well, but there wasn't exactly the clearest view of the financial position of the business, never mind individual projects.

"There was inadequate reporting, and the partnership had a sense they didn't know where the business was going. When I joined I absolutely confirmed that impression, and the word I used a lot in the first few weeks was 'fog' - being in a thick fog and kind of trying to drive more or less in the right direction."

The culprit behind this financial miasma? A multi-system nightmare of disjointed and laborious processes. According to Global Business Systems Manager Tanya Quelch, it was 'crazy' how long it took to produce reports.

"We had multiple systems that were super disconnected. It was almost impossible to create a consolidated report on the projects and collect information at once.

We were managing HR in Excel, timesheets were in another document system, finance was in a finance system -so it was really hard to know where we were in terms of project profitability, and it was an enormous task to do any reporting for the partners. In some cases it took us days to do the reports."

So there was a clear need for a change of process if Grimshaw were to facilitate the responsible business practices they were after. But what exactly were they aiming for when it came to implementing an integrated practice management system?

"To have the key information and projects in one system, with the ability to report information in real time. And also give project managers the ability to track their project in a simple environment and not rely on the finance team to produce numerous reports."

That's quite a significant culture change that Grimshaw were pursuing, but it was a conscious one. Neil was determined to drive home the point that the profitability of the business was ultimately everyone's responsibility.

"It's about better financial management throughout the business, people understanding that managing projects appropriately from a financial perspective - be that ensuring we're making a profit, managing to your agreed resource budget, going back to the client when there are scope variations, or ensuring that you're getting paid and getting paid upfront as far as possible - ensuring that people all the way down the business understand it's a part of their responsibilities."

So what was it about CMap that Neil thought made us best placed to help deliver that culture change?

"First of all, much, much, much superior look and feel, which makes it feel like a system that's not a pure finance system -something that design professionals can use and will use. There was a sense that we would be much more likely to get better adoption by going down that route."

Tanya agrees:

"CMap stands out from the others on the market because of the fresh and modern look of it, and also the amount of functionality it's offering to the users -especially on the project accounting side. A lot of the different functionality, the leave system, the app and the dashboards, all of those - they think it's great."

CMap's beauty isn't just skin deep. Sure it looks good, but there's a reason for that. It's not an intimidating piece of software, and as a result, people are happy to get on board.

"It's self-explanatory and it's an adaptable system. It has a very easy-to-use feel, even though it has a lot of functionality to offer. It gives that simplicity to people so they're not scared of using the system, they actually feel it's quite straightforward and easy to use."

An approachable interface and ease-of-use results in the one thing so many systems fail at: adoption. Previously, because of the multiple systems Grimshaw employed, by the time reports were created the figures would be '3 to 4 weeks out of date' according to Neil.

Now though, because of that real-time reporting, staff can see exactly how their projects are performing without having to request reports from finance, and take decisions based on accurate, up-to-date info.

"It's feeding down the idea that appropriate financial management is part of everybody's responsibilities. And from a purely systems specific point of view, it's about providing the software that enables them to do that job, and having the whole business interact with the software rather than going to Finance and asking them to pull a report."

By being more wary of their project financials, the architects at Grimshaw are better able to look after the bottom line. The result of that fiscal prudence? Greater creative freedom.

"Architectural practices shouldn't make profitability their number one priority. They should be doing things that aren't necessarily profitable, but are good for the business, they're good for the world, they make the world a better place, and they're good for the architects as well. But in order to be able to do those things, you have to know that the business as a whole can support it."

And with CMap, Grimshaw are able to deliver their projects with profit margins in-tact. More profitability has resulted in more staff -they've grown from 'around 400 to 600 users' according to Tanya - and more rewarding projects.

Long may it continue.