



Digital Dictation and workflow from V7 Technology

V7 Technology unites Colliers CRE surveyors and support staff

About Colliers CRE

Colliers CRE is one of the UK's top ten real estate advisory organisations. It employs 750 people in 14 offices throughout the UK. Colliers CRE is an independent member of the worldwide Colliers International organisation, which has over 9,000 staff based in 248 offices in 51 countries.

The company has the extensive resources and excellent support infrastructure of a large company, but its approach to customers and their projects is based on small teams, simple lines of communication and a personal touch.

Dictation – a core Colliers CRE process

Surveyors within Colliers CRE produce thousands of dictations each week. Prior to acquiring the V7 system there was no real remote solution for getting dictations to their secretaries whilst surveyors worked remotely for a few days. This would result in an accumulation of work which would then swamp the support teams and create a real productivity and workflow problem.

Analogue recorders exacerbated this problem, secretaries would need to fast-forward tapes and search multiple dictations to find the urgent items. This created a problem when support staff were called upon to help share workloads. Secretaries who were available in other departments or regional offices were simply not able to help effectively.

The workplace environment alternated between periods of high and low demand as the delay in releasing work for typing resulted in peaks and troughs of typing duties. Outsourced typists was used by the minority who were using simple email data transfer when producing larger reports but this process was not automated and therefore it was impossible obtain usage statistics. An analog solution was also used which was a time consuming and costly procedure. A ninety minute dictation over a telephone coupling device took the same time again to transfer. Increasing the speed of the tapes reduced the audio quality and the dictations frequently become distorted. The surveyors were desperate for a new approach that would allow them to upload dictations immediately from remote locations - and so too were the secretaries.

Colliers CRE always appreciate a good merger

The firm's history of mergers and acquisitions had led to departments using different dictation systems that were incompatible with each other. Colliers CRE Business Systems and IT department wanted a new approach to dictation and were looking for a solution that

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would enable integrated dictation across all departments and offices utilising the Group's WAN.

V7 - the right business driver

Remote working for surveyors was the clear priority and all the leading Digital Dictation System vendors were invited to tender. At the time no one was able to solve the problem until V7 Technology, a relatively new company to the sector, offered its services.

A short demonstration enabled V7 to show that its highly streamlined system not only provided the urgently needed remote working capability but provided the ideal integration solution too. Tracey Higgs, Project Manager, said "We wanted a one-stop solution that would enable all the teams across the country to help each other. No barriers horizontally or vertically and V7 fulfilled the brief perfectly".

Fast implementation and training

Once V7 had been appointed, a phased rollout across the UK was scheduled starting with the London offices. Perry Willis, Director of IT, placed special emphasis on internal training. From the Business Systems and IT perspective it was vital everyone thoroughly understood the new system before people started using it, otherwise the support desk would be inundated.

Tracey Higgs said, "We ensured surveyors, for example, were able to identify a dictation as a new file, report, letter or memo. We also emphasised the need to utilise the unique capability of the V7 system that allows them to download dictations to their computers and then transfer the audio files back to the local Colliers CRE office as regularly as possible to avoid backlogs building up".

Perry Willis was impressed with the efficient implementation process. He said, "There has been minimum disruption. The only downtime was taking people from their desks for 30 minute training. Even the technophobes didn't require more than an hour. It's been remarkably smooth. I'm very pleased."

Tracey Higgs added, "The training phase went so well that people who were still using the old systems were asking when they could have it. Word of mouth has been extremely positive".

V7 dictation brings about a workplace culture

The ability to manage dictation more efficiently has had a profound effect on working practices in the support teams. Each department has a team administrator who monitors the work and reallocates authors to different support staff if required.

This has resulted in dictations being outsourced to reliable external typing houses without the need for telephone coupling device. Digital sound files are sent electronically making this process virtually instantaneous. Secretaries are now free to handle a wider variety of tasks. Colliers CRE has therefore gained the benefit of more valuable PA capability across the company.

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Originally there was an unspoken fear that the introduction of Digital Dictation would lead to a reduced head count and the creation of an enterprise-wide typing pool. Perry Willis explained that this was never an objective. "The secretaries are responsible for completing a wide range of tasks but bursts of dictations can consign them to hours of typing. We wanted the secretaries to retain their individuality".

To prove the worth of skilled secretaries to Colliers CRE, Perry and Tracey involved the Human Resources Department in the project. "Before there was no way of measuring how much work teams did. Now, the V7 system can be used to demonstrate the wide range of tasks undertaken".

As morale has increased, the V7 system has helped to eliminate territorial attitudes to the secretarial support of surveyors. Support staff realise that no one ever again has to single-handedly shoulder a huge backlog when returning from holiday or illness or if a surveyor was to need a large volume of work typed urgently.

Surveyors benefit too

The surveyors are happier too because remote working has been made much easier. All files are shown on the computer from the V7 software on the handheld recorder. The author can choose to download all of these or select the most urgent, adding a reference to identify each file. Some surveyors used to type their own urgent reports but now they realise that the V7 system allows these to be identified and produced faster. Tracey said "to say that V7 is a simple to use system is an understatement".

Centralised support for surveyors and secretaries

Prior to Digital Dictation there was no reliance on the Business System and IT department for dictation at all. It was done through facilities teams and stationery buyers. V7 has helped provide some core control and support for this vital activity at the centre of Colliers CRE business. It is a technology based business tool and so comes under the IT umbrella. Whereas before there was no specific support, users now have access to the central help desk, although Tracey said, "This hasn't happened for three reasons. One: it's easy to use. Two: our training is sufficient for everyone to use it without further help. Three: the system is reliable".

The future is flexible for Colliers CRE

The simplicity of the V7 system is cost effective to Colliers CRE as they are using a dedicated digital dictation server in their head office and share space on the regional servers which are all linked on a WAN.

"The V7 software did not require any changes to be made to the existing infrastructure," Perry said, "this would not have been true for most of the other systems we saw. We would have needed to add Microsoft SQL servers which would have meant more licences, more cost per user and a higher price for the digital dictation system". Tracey added "although the low cost was attractive it was a secondary factor".

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The V7 system includes Disaster Recover and Business Continuity options so should a server go down dictations can still be entered into the Colliers network or recovered from a particular desktop PC.

Whether Colliers CRE choose to centralise the network in future or to continue with a distributed architecture it will not make any difference to the digital dictation system. V7 allows Colliers the freedom and flexibility to shape the future IT infrastructure as they please.

V7 dictation helps boost Colliers CRE strong growth and increased profits

Apart from providing Colliers CRE with attractive investment cost, there are lower licensing costs. Perry Willis anticipates that, even with the purchase of new handheld recorders for all users, the complete UK roll out will provide ROI in about a year.

According to Colliers 2005 Annual Report, the Group is delighted with its operating infrastructure. David Izzet, Managing Director, said in the report "Through investment in our operating infrastructure, offices and people, we have transactional capacity of the highest calibre and one which is leveraged by our specialist sector teams and the strength of Colliers International globally... ..Our accommodation, business systems and IT are now first class. We will continue to invest in them to ensure they remain so".

For further information about the V7 Digital Dictation System contact Simon Westcott
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