

# Business first

Tony Leppard, managing director of FMx Ltd, describes the development of the company's CAFM Explorer software and explains to Sara Bean the business benefits of adopting the right CAFM system

**This magazine receives press releases all the time that describe the latest whizzy technologies** – many of which are worded with phrases such as 'paradigm shift', 'embedded' and 'configuration'. Yet for us, as with any busy FM, too much techno-babble only serves to confuse rather than inform.

Tony Leppard, managing director and founder of FMx Ltd and supplier of CAFM Explorer, which has been supplying Computer Aided Facilities Management software for more than 20 years, believes passionately in the power of technology to help a business – and the importance of avoiding technology speak. 'My main interest is FM, based around architecture and structural engineering,' says Leppard. 'What I love is getting software to act as a tool and be able to assist in that process. My goal is always to listen to my customers, and it definitely helps that I'm not too technically minded.'

Hooray for that! And what also helps Leppard understand his customers' needs is that, like them, he hails from an FM background. After his hopes of becoming a professional footballer were dashed, he qualified as a structural engineer in the mid-Seventies and joined a partitioning company where, during the next eight years, he was promoted through the ranks from a new young draughtsman to company director.

'The company I was working for was very forward thinking and wanted to computerise everything,' he remembers. 'Back then it was more about space planning, the layout of furniture and partitions. We found this small software house in the US that had a brilliant product and I was given responsibility for commissioning it into the UK.'

In fact, Leppard was so impressed with the software he left his job and established an agency agreement to exclusively sell the software in the UK: it was to become one of the first FM software products. Back in 1984, of course, the PC was in its infancy, so the mainframe computer hardware needed to run the software cost around £200,000 and the software itself was worth around £50,000 – all to run a system with the equivalent power of a modern-day handheld computer. Faced with prohibitive system costs, Leppard instead offered customers a bureau service aimed at helping large corporate organisations with their space planning and recharging. His other challenge (in the days before facilities management became a recognised job function) lay in finding the right people to deal with in each organisation. Back then, that usually meant someone from the administration department.

'The change in technologies has been matched by the dramatic change in facilities management,' says Leppard. 'With AutoCad

emerging as an industry standard in the late Eighties and the widespread adoption of PCs and Windows in the Nineties, we were able to use the familiarity of Microsoft Outlook to develop a product that encouraged non-technical and infrequent users to easily interpret the data. Meanwhile, the administration people we dealt with were gradually organised into facilities teams.'

A key component in the evolution of what became CAFM Explorer software, says Leppard, is its user group, which has been in existence since the software's initial development in the US. He decided early on to retain this independent user group to help steer developers on customers' needs, which understandably have also changed greatly over the years. 'The early product was geared towards space planning and charging, while today the main heart of the system contains helpdesk and PPM (Planned Preventative Maintenance),' he explains.

The user group consists of independent and volunteer customers who sit on a committee run by Wayne Saville of AIG Europe. The user group is run totally independently from FMx, but Leppard and other company representatives are kept abreast of their views and invited to attend the annual user-group conference. During the long three years spent working on the current release of CAFM Explorer, the user group

Photography by David Vintiner



held workshops, surveys, and so on, and fed their information back to FMx to help its development team better re-engineer the contents of its package.

As for the software itself, Leppard says, 'the software had to be database-driven. It consists of a really robust database because the more information you put in, the more a system slows down, so you have to have something

scaleable. The database is at the very heart of our software. It's like a very sophisticated building that has been engineered to be the right fit for a business in the same way a new building should be – and it's designed to be equally as efficient for a company with just 1,850 sq m as it is for a large blue-chip corporate with hundreds of licences and massive, continuous demands on the database.

'The point is not to over-engineer the software and make it too costly. We're selling software that costs under a thousand pounds and looks and feels like Outlook, so we can target SMEs as well as the large corporates,' says Leppard. Amazingly however, he reveals that many organisations are still subsisting on basic, sometimes eccentric, systems that do little to help or enhance the role of the

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facilities management team. 'You will still find organisations that have something installed for the helpdesk, something else for the room booker and something different again for the CAD system and so it goes on. There's no way of sharing the information contained in that way, so the opportunity to bring order to such chaos is a good one for us.'

'In our experience it's not a good idea to use, for instance, an Excel spreadsheet to log helpdesk calls. I'd hate to think of the money we've seen wasted because of the inaccuracies caused by doing it that way. So it's 20 years on from CAFM Explorer's inception and we're still working hard to educate the market!'

FMx supplies software to service providers as well as end-users who, says Leppard, usually require the same functions, albeit with an emphasis on the production of reports. The software has also been developed to enable developers to add their own 'flavours'. And although FMx uses a team of account managers and project managers to run its customer accounts, Leppard admits that he 'handles as many customers as I can, so I have the chance to listen to their needs first hand. I thoroughly enjoy working with them.'

He also insists in hiring client-facing staff who don't have a technical background, and who can be trained up to understand the software while not blinding customers with science. 'The people in the first line of customer support should be in tune with and sympathetic to the end-user's take on technology,' he argues. 'The end-users are not technologists after all, they're facilities people.'

After first adopting and then adapting the original US-based software, Leppard has now reintroduced CAFM Explorer to the US market. He's set up a sales team in the US to sell the product and it's backed up by a helpdesk team based in the UK. All the software development is done at his Crawley HQ staffed by 'brilliant developer minds' who are currently in the throes of designing the next incarnation of CAFM Explorer. Meanwhile, the success of the product in the UK has led to the massive expansion of the FMx team, which now encompasses some 40 members of staff.

'It's kind of ironic that we're facing the same sort of problems our customers face every week,' says Leppard. 'Currently we've got a 370 sq m building in 0.4ha of land and planners won't let us increase the space, so we've decided to source a plot of land for

a 930 sq m building. We now have the logistics of what to do with the current facility and how to plan for the new one. We are, of course, using our own software to help plan and manage our moves. It helps us appreciate what we're trying to deliver to our customers.'

So what of the future of CAFM software? Like FMx themselves, says Leppard, CAFM software has moved up the agenda, and although most IT departments have to give their seal of approval to any major CAFM purchase, this is more of a reflection on the important role this software plays within an organisation rather than any undermining of the FM's role.

'I see the future of CAFM systems dependant on their ability to work with other business systems and provide infrequent users with data on the move, so my message is simple,' he says. 'Chose your CAFM solution very carefully: it could mean the difference between success and failure.' **fmx**

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