



FMJ recently visited the CAFM Explorer User Group to find out how customers are helping to develop the software they use on a daily basis, and why their contribution is vital to a constantly evolving industry.

# CAFM

to the future and beyond

The dawn of information technology (IT) has led to significant strides in the way we view, process and handle information; and while the speed at which we conceive technological advancements has protracted over time, IT has turned something that was an evolutionary process into a constantly active revolution. And as the IT revolution in Silicon Valley, California was well on its way to adding exciting, new dimensions to our world in the 1980s, facilities management was starting to take shape in Margaret Thatcher's new Britain. Increasingly, facilities managers looked to IT software to help them track and manage companies' assets, so the computer aided facilities management (CAFM) system was born.

However, as our use of IT software has developed in the last two decades, so the capabilities of CAFM systems have. What were once used to determine the shape, layout and size of office space, can now potentially be used to manage energy, analyse extreme amounts of data, and carry out all sorts of maintenance requirements.

So if advancements in technology continue to develop at such a rate, CAFM of 2021 will look and operate very differently to CAFM of today. But in order for CAFM systems to both evolve and be more effective, manufacturers must find out how they are used and what they are used for. The people most appropriately placed to answer these questions are the users themselves, or the customers.

One manufacturer doing just that is FMx and its product is CAFM Explorer. In order to develop the product and launch new releases, FMx has formed a user group. Each year this user group meets to discuss their use of the product, concerns they may have, and possible additions to it that may help them in future.

Founded in 1985, FMx stresses that the CAFM Explorer User Group is independent from the company. Each event, including the one FMJ visited at Mercedes Benz World in September, contains workshops and seminars with a distinct lack of sales pitch or advertisement.

A key figure at these events is Michael Priestley, head of business services at international law firm Withers and chairman of the CAFM Explorer User Group. Priestley has been using the product for almost ten years and has taken a proactive interest in developing it for his company's benefit. He uses the product for budget control, helpdesk management and planned maintenance.

Priestley explains how he was first asked to go to a user group event as an observer, but once he saw the process working in front of him, he was adamant that he wanted to be involved. In fact, the networking, sharing of information and benchmarking at show was something he expected from an actual CAFM system while specifying one.

"It was something special," he explains. "A dynamic support networking group that swapped ideas and best practice, and shared worries and expectations such as mine."

The user group instantly began to give Priestley some very good advice. "I learnt that with FM software, I should learn to walk before I run," he explains. "CAFM explorer is developed through the user group, which has specific but also joint needs, and it contains a strong committee with a focus on development, which prioritises user needs to help focus its CAFM offering."

Priestley is an incredibly interesting and enthusiastic character with a million stories to tell. Some of his stories have even influenced his work and the CAFM systems he uses today.

In a previous life, he was a Royal Navy Buccaneer on Iraq reconnaissance duties.

"I was used to flying jet aircraft at low levels and very high speeds," explains Priestley. "All controls were pulling in one direction and I could check the status of all of the plane's operating systems instantaneously."

It was what he was used to, so Priestley asked the technicians at CAFM Explorer if they could design him an interface that matched the high octane thrills of his days in the Royal Navy. CAFM Explorer duly obliged and Priestley now operates FM software for his law firm that shares similar dials and graphs with the cockpit of a modern warplane (see graph below). However, rather than search for enemy combatants, military weapons or secret hideouts, he tracks financial costs and invoices, controls budgets and operates on a macro management level.

Priestley's firm has recognised the benefits of using CAFM, the user group and also their business services manager's responsibility as chairman. CAFM Explorer has made the business far more efficient, saving it £575,000 by simply tracking its processes.

Each year, FMx releases three service packs with minor additions to CAFM Explorer. These additions, of course, are developed from the ideas and suggestions brought up in the annual user group event and online forum. A major update is then released once every two years. However, the revolutionary process of IT systems means that CAFM Explorer is never really new. Instead, it is a constantly changing piece of software that adapts to the customer's needs and wider business landscape.

If CAFM of today looks like the cockpit of Priestley's 20th century jet plane, will CAFM of tomorrow represent the cockpit of a 20th century spaceship? In an increasingly mobile workforce, for example, CAFM systems may have more to do with the motions of an airplane than first thought. But while legislation changes, margins become tighter and different aspects of business shift in importance, it is vital that companies recognise how their employees interact with technology, what they need from it and how software can help manage human resources.

