

BusinessChange

Voting for More

With 5,600 users in 33 countries, and 25 years of development history, the software product CAFM Explorer continues to be defined by its users. Jane Fenwick talks to Tony Leppard about the benefits of this 'democratic' development process

LIFTING OFF FROM GATWICK AIRPORT, just beyond the last of the long term car parks you can see what looks like a large executive home. But for the planes taking off at roof height just a field away, Westfield House – home to FMx – is in the depths of the countryside accessed by narrow country lanes. Not the place one would imagine for some leading edge technological development in the service of the facilities manager, but it is here that for 12 of the past 25 years, FMx managing director, Tony Leppard has built a formidable software product brand – CAFM Explorer – that for many in the FM sector helps to make their lives easier, or even possible.

Celebrating a 25th anniversary is a rarity in FM in the UK which only dates from the early 1980's. For example, PFM first published in 1986 and the BIFM dates from 1993. Furthermore, FMx is probably the only organisation in the FM sector to have added to the language of FM claiming a little bit of FM history. The term 'Computer Aided Facilities Management' - or CAFM for short - was registered as a trademark by Tony Leppard back in 1988 and has since become absorbed into FM-speak.

For 23 of those 25 years FMx has been listening to its CAFM users and developing its products in response to their needs, making it one of the most advanced and yet most easy to use CAFM systems available. Its CAFM Explorer User Group is the major influence on how the product has

developed in the past and a valuable influence on its future.

According to Leppard, "This close association with our clients coupled with our elite Gold Partnership status with Microsoft has without doubt made CAFM Explorer one of the easiest to use and most productive CAFM solutions in the market today."

Leppard's background in structural engineering and architecture provided the link to computing and FM, and proved to be the spur to his interest in the user management of the built environment. As we walked through his newly refurbished offices at Westfield House he recalled how 25 years ago the amount of computing power today would have filled the whole ground floor. Now, the switch room containing the IT hub with a virtual environment on servers and telecoms routers, is a large glass fronted 'cupboard' situated at the heart of the building, as it is at the heart of the FMx business operation.

Leppard moved the company to its current location 12 years ago, demolishing the existing domestic property to rebuild on the one acre site. In the last six months the interior has undergone a £1m transformation to create an open light and transparent environment that is a mixture of modern working facilities, tasteful design and youthful vigour.

The 38 staff comprising 11 software developers, four account managers/project managers, four sales people, two training officers plus marketing, administration, helpdesk and installation staff, now enjoy the kind of working environment more frequently found in city offices rather than in the depths of the country. A modern kitchen equipped with a sociable bar and seating, a 'juke box' for music of their choice and TV provides the staff with an opportunity to mix, break out and eat. In full view of the large, light reception, it sets the tone for the rest of the building and indicates the ethos of people who work within it.

His people are important to Leppard. He admits that searching for this small niche of people is tough. "We have a good recruitment process that filters people thoroughly so that the right people come through that are suited to development work. I go for the right 'FMx character' and everyone in this team is very customer orientated. A natural spirit is easily recognisable – it's all about chemistry."

When it comes to 25 years of developing the CAFM Explorer solution, Leppard's focus on listening and learning from the people that use it has been crucial. His business model is surprisingly simple. At under £1,000 cost of entry is low – particularly as this price has not changed

Tony Leppard, MD FMx



for five years and is now equivalent to just £800. With customers in every business sector in the country and with an enviable list of top corporate and public sector organisations, Leppard has now set his sights on the SME market.

As Leppard explained, "The price is so right for the SME market at less than £1000 per licence with all the training and self learning tutorials. That is not a big investment for a small company to make to get started on, say, a Help Desk and very cost effective to get operational. You can start with one building or one part of the application. There are no hidden extras. Once someone has bought the product they can use all the functionality moving forward. You can take the product with just five licences and scale up to become a big customer such as the Co-operative Group which has a product in every site. There is no degradation of performance as they put more and more data in and take on more licences. There is a huge confidence factor that you are not buying something for £1000 that will run out of steam a few years down the line."

The cost and the simplicity of getting started by just downloading the software from the CAFM Explorer website together with self learning tools, and the scalability makes it particularly ideal for SME's. The beauty for the SME users is that they benefit from developments incorporated in the CAFM Explorer system arising from the operational experience of users going back 23 years. Scalability means that they only take and pay for the functionality that they need and do not have to master a system that is beyond their capabilities or requirements. And the familiar look and feel of Microsoft Outlook makes it easy to build up the data and use standard or customisable reports and is appreciated by infrequent users.

Working with the User Group is vital to FMx, not just for feedback on the functionality of the system but for directing the way the product will develop. If this is an example of the 'tail wagging the dog' then Leppard welcomes it and holds the expert input from the members in high regard.

The CAFM Explorer User Group holds an annual event that includes workshops run by customers for customers. The main objective of the day apart from networking and catching up with the latest CAFM Explorer developments, is to tease out anything that can improve the system. Leppard sits on the User Group committee but it is the users who 'democratically' evolve a wish list of priorities.

In recent years the User Group prioritised web and mobile enabled solutions so that users can log their own calls, contractors can close off their calls, and maintenance engineers are able to use iPhone, camera, blackberry devices etc, to call up relevant data.

Just last year, FMx rolled out improvements to managing facilities cost control identified by the User Group. As Leppard explained, most CAFM systems handle cost control on the FM activities but this is not usually connected to the business finance data. Some User Group members explored how this could be done so that CAFM Explorer can both handle purchase orders and track invoices. One customer voluntarily ran data from his finance department in parallel with that from the CAFM system and compared the two,

only to find glaring differences resulting from double payments, inaccuracies, mistakes and errors. The amount saved which includes efficiencies with contractors totalled a staggering £570,000 in just one year.

A 'splinter group' of User Group members developed the specification for enhanced cost control and FMx software developers worked on the solution so that now all CAFM Explorer users can automatically take the information from business finance systems and compare it against budget codes to check all costs against budget and analyse any differences.

For Leppard, the input from the User Group is invaluable. "Once the User Group comes up with their specification, the product developers at FMx interpret this into technical development which is shared again with the User Group to refine the specification. By the time we get to the next annual major user group event in April 2009 we will have brought through some of the easier things on wish list of 2008 in the service pack; the more difficult things will be already in production. It's a great way of working."

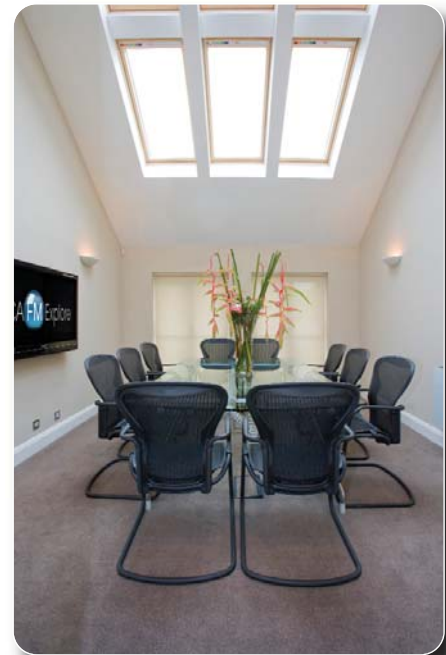
FMx is also following its users outside the UK with CAFM Explorer employed to manage the international estates of its clients, like the law firm Withers LLP. Additionally as Leppard explained, FMx is dealing direct with new overseas clients via its website. So far CAFM Explorer users can be found in the US, Australia, Abu Dhabi, Malaysia, Africa, Dubai, Canada and Morocco. Once again the low cost of the CAFM Explorer product and ease of getting set up is attractive to online sales. Leppard has plans to bolster support for overseas users including extending support times, more account managers and a whole host of new services based on video conferencing technology.

Currently the User Group is focussing on enhancing the capabilities of CAFM Explorer in managing energy use and costs. Groups have been formed for energy and sustainability to find out precisely what information users want from the system in detail - the reports, on screen views, integration with other systems, benchmarks and alerts, for example - to help FM's to reduce costs and overheads. By the time of the next User Group annual meeting in May 2009, development will be well underway.

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A general office (below) and conference room in the newly refurbished offices of FMx (above)

