

Feature: Managing Energy by Managing Space

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Cost reduction doesn't have to mean doing without what you need. It can mean understanding what you have and how to make better use of it.

Facilities management can be a strange beast. It often bucks business trends. When times were good and City bankers were still investing in fast cars and sinking millions into homes in the sun, FMs were religiously contemplating how to reduce energy usage to battle soaring costs. It could almost be a case of who laughs last now - but FMs seem to deliberately avoid the 'I told you so' line.

So here we are a year on, with political commentators telling of dark days. Heavy sighs echo with not recession so much as depression, to the point where everyone has grown tired of the negative rhetoric. It makes a nice change then to hear of business success in a time when, frankly, there is little good news out there. Who would think that the head of a software company from across the pond would be talking up business prospects for 2009? But this is exactly the mood that John Anderson is in.

Anderson is CEO of [PeopleCube](#). Companies like his, that develop resource scheduling software for space, see themselves as part of the FM supply chain. For many in the FM sector, bad times seem to bring out the best of times. Suddenly cost reduction and rationalising resources are words not just on the FM's lips but at the tip of everyone's tongue. Finance Directors have property and FM firmly in their sights as opportunities emerge for streamlining and rationalising resources. It's FM's opportunity to steal the limelight.

Meeting a need

Like other workplace scheduling software developers, PeopleCube can see a direct correlation between the use of its product and rationalising resources within a property and FM remit. And let's face it, for some businesses we're talking about strategies for the survival of the organisation, not creating a competitive edge. Here is good news, then, in that this type of support can fill a real business need - that of reducing cost.

Work space in office environments is too often not used efficiently. You only have to visit a large HQ building on a Friday afternoon and see the swathes of unoccupied desks, or look at how excessively under- or over-used meeting room spaces often are, to realise that the job of balancing the needs of a changing organisation is not easy. Shared spaces, such as meeting rooms and hot desks, are notoriously difficult to manage. Not much easier is the business of accurately assessing demand and then translating that into space that supports productivity for an organisation.

Where a resource management tool comes into its own is when the need for any administration of the rooms and spaces is removed. This doesn't just mean that it saves on administration headcount, but the software makes the system simpler to use. As bookings are managed by the individuals, there is no need for a central 'controller' because the system does this for you. A web-based system has the added advantage that users don't have to be in the space to make their bookings. More importantly, time isn't wasted in sorting out who booked what; the system

simply won't allow double bookings or queue jumping.

With the right set-up, an FM can make sure the system will check how rooms are selected and that the most appropriate room is selected for a particular meeting. For example, if a user is booking a meeting space for three people, the system can be set up to only show rooms that are suitable for less than four. Shared spaces such as hot desks can be booked via the system as well, which means that if the space needs a concierge that person can concentrate on the job in hand, not helping with bookings.

Finding the value in data

Although on the face of it the benefits of using this type of software are all about efficiencies in the booking process, PeopleCube is well aware of the product's 'golden egg'. With some clever programming, resource scheduling software can change from a purely administrative tool to a decision-making tool. PeopleCube's Resource Scheduler, for instance, has a long memory and quickly builds up a rich fund of data. Program developers have been working hard to turn this raw data into another facet of the system to give organisations real-time visibility on space use. Whilst the re-charge options have always been in place to apportion catering or video-conferencing to the relevant cost centre, the opportunity to understand how the space ticks has not been fully exploited - until now.

Workspace business intelligence information can now be leveraged to support business cases for changing how space is used. For example, where gut-feel may not be a good enough argument to reduce the number of hot desks available, a data-based report could show that only half the desks are ever occupied at one time. Imagine also that the data could prove that you don't need 12-person meeting rooms. It may show that the maximum number of people ever booked for a meeting is six (and that, perversely, the organisation consistently hires additional meeting spaces at a local business centre to accommodate three and four-person meetings - it does happen). This type of information could lead the FM to reconfigure the 12-person spaces to smaller rooms, which would prove both more productive and more cost-effective.

But using space efficiently is only one part of the picture and, in fact, one that is not necessarily about short-term gain. This time last year, reducing carbon emissions was high on the agenda - even if for more altruistic reasons than for saving money. Although the issue hasn't dropped down the agenda, many organisations now readily admit this is all about saving on costs.

It is possible, with a bit of lateral thinking, to reflect on the opportunities of linking space usage to energy usage.

PeopleCube has been able to do just that. Thanks to an open system and API (application programming interface), the space management system can link to a building management system, say, to regulate the temperature and lighting according to the usage of the space. And organisations have seen the opportunities for better management of energy. With a link to the Building Sustainability Footprint Tracker product from Building Sustainability Ltd, for example, energy use can be directly attributed not just to departments but individuals as well. This means that simple software tools can be turned into opportunities to highlight where energy is being wasted, enabling decision-makers to put in place strategies to reduce that waste.

John Anderson sees the challenge not in developing new ideas or in finding willing partners to harness the opportunities that software marriages can bring, but in demystifying the software so it is no longer only the IT audience that 'gets it'. PeopleCube's aspiration is to have these products seen as tools for FMs to take up and use, not just to get everyone out of today's economic hole but to make managing space and saving energy more of a science than an art.