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Is IT key to the Big Society?

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Having recently stepped out of its NHS comfort zone and 'gone live' as a social enterprise business, Care Plus Group has its sights set on becoming the provider of choice for adult care in North East Lincolnshire. CEO Lance Gardner tells Paul Curran how Microsoft technology is playing its part in this ambition.

If you've ever bought *The Big Issue*, visited the Eden Project or shopped at the Co-op, then you've already experienced social enterprise, a growing global trend in which profitable ventures aim to change the world for the better, rather than lining shareholder pockets. As their name suggests, social enterprises are generally cooperatives that trade to tackle social problems and improve communities, people's life chances, or the environment.

If that all sounds to you like charity work, then think again; because social enterprises are certainly businesses, too. From cleaning companies to chocolate makers, they all provide products and services to earn money, and they make profits like any other business; the difference is those profits are visibly reinvested to do more good.

One such outfit is Grimsby-based Care Plus Group (CPG), which recently moved its staff across from their previous employer, North East Lincolnshire NHS Care Trust (NELCPT).

The creation of not-for-profit enterprises like CPG is part of a government Right to Request scheme, allowing health workers to spin out services they provide into independent businesses, with the proviso that they operate separately from their commissioners. It means that by next year, some 57 healthcare-related businesses will be providing services worth about £900m annually and employing around 25,000 staff who have transferred from NHS trusts.

Driving greater efficiency

Whilst technically a business that needs to make profits, CEO Lance Gardner says CPG chose the social enterprise route to preserve the founding principles of the NHS. A nurse by trade and serial social entrepreneur to boot, Gardner has spent much of his career driving innovation in the health economy.

"The values in our charter were borrowed verbatim from the 1946 National Health Service Act," he says proudly. "Whilst we now have greater flexibility to introduce better ways of working, delivering health care free at the point of need is still our underlying mission. Becoming a social enterprise simply means we can work more closely with the local community to reshape adult care and deliver a totally patient-focused service. The savings we make from doing things more efficiently will be ploughed back into developing and delivering new services."

For this reason alone, Gardner took a keener interest than would most CEOs in his organisation's choice of financial IT system. "Technology is critical to our success," he says. "Whilst we have to make a profit, our real objective is to deliver best possible patient care. That means having the best possible systems so our employees can do the best possible job. Being on our own as a social enterprise means we can no longer go to our NHS employers to ask for more funds when we need them, so budget control is absolutely essential. Moreover, we're now responsible for our own end-to-end accounting."

Exploring alternative solutions

All of which meant that CPG needed a suitable enterprise resource planning (ERP) tool to support its business from day one. Like many NHS organisations, it had traditionally used NHS Oracle for back-office purposes; but Gardner says this could not be tailored easily to suit CPG's business processes or to track its financial performance.



"Oracle may well be the tool of choice for some large NHS organisations, but it does finance and not much more," he claims. "What we needed was an affordable system that we could easily adapt to our specific needs, such as: producing personal health budgets, care navigation, costing of care packages, communication and integration with our new GP commissioning colleagues when planning client costs, and so forth."

With these requirements in mind, Gardner and his finance team set about exploring suitable software solutions and suppliers that could provide:

- Financial visibility and control of financial data to help make effective strategic decisions
- Organisational efficiency by minimising delays in the day to day running of the business, allowing staff to focus on business-critical tasks
- Flexible reporting to enable management to quickly export data and analyse it at a glance
- Business insight to help improve business performance and frontline services
- A way to streamline costs and reduce overheads.

"I had previously been impressed by Microsoft Dynamics NAV and the team at Advantage Business Systems (ABS) when they presented this solution to another social enterprise I was involved with," says Gardner. "Finance staff don't generally get excited about much," he says with a smile. "But I've certainly never seen my guys so ecstatic as when Microsoft Dynamics NAV was demonstrated to them for the first time. They were particularly impressed by its functionality and how cost-effective it was to maintain, plus its flexibility to grow with us. And not just grow with us - but also with fellow social enterprises."

Here, Gardner is referring to the fact that at least 15 of the healthcare-related social enterprises currently being formed under the Right to Request scheme began life on the kitchen table and have an annual turnover under £2m. "We've deliberately built spare capacity into our IT infrastructure to create economies of scale, so that once we have our support services - including Microsoft Dynamics NAV - in place, we'll be able to offer these to other smaller social enterprises with very limited budgets. For instance, a group of nurses setting up a speech therapy business will be able to 'piggy-back' off our investment at minimal additional cost and thereby make massive public sector savings."

Cost savings and lower TCO

Gardner says another deciding factor in CPG's selection of Microsoft Dynamics NAV is that it works like other Microsoft products, making it easy for staff to adopt. "It means they can export our data easily to familiar Office tools like Excel and analyse the performance of the business. In short, it has the flexibility, scalability and cost-effectiveness to help us drive greater operational efficiency."

Following ABS's implementation of Microsoft Dynamics NAV in under three months, CPG now has a comprehensive solution which promises total cost of ownership (TCO) savings of up to £100k or around 75% over four years, allowing for a version upgrade during that period. "These are cost savings that, in turn, will result in benefits to the local community," says Gardner. "I'm therefore delighted with our selection of Microsoft Dynamics NAV as our finance solution."

"I believe the implementation of the system will not only help us achieve significant cost and time savings in the day-to-day running of our business, but also provide us with the necessary business insight to make us highly efficient and competitive for the future. Over time, we therefore anticipate investing further in the Microsoft Dynamics portfolio to enhance our services and efficiencies."