

Case study: Willmott Dixon

Willmott Dixon ushers in new era of planning with the help of Asta Powerproject

With a turnover in excess of £1 billion each year, and an enviable reputation to maintain, independent UK construction and property heavyweight Willmott Dixon has always valued planning. Yet, it has an ambition for more, creating a dedicated team to drive excellence in time and planning management with a mandate to help every one of its 3500 employees to contribute to great planning. As part of this, the company embarked on a process to ensure that their choice of planning platform came not just from analysis of available choices and benefits, but built in the needs and views of its many planning software users. It revealed an overwhelming desire to move to Asta Powerproject, and kick-started a process of change which will drive long-term benefits and support the company's BIM and digital construction ambitions.



WILLMOTT DIXON

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Paul Hoskins, National Planning Manager at Willmott Dixon, has been tasked with a big challenge. As leader of the FIIT Time team, he has been charged with driving a new culture of planning across the company.

FIIT Time, which stands for Focused Innovation and Improvement Team for Time, resides officially in the



Construction division. However, it has a mandate to help people across the corporation, including in its Interiors and Homes businesses, become more involved in, and more conscious of, planning and time. In explaining its role, Paul began: "FIIT Time is helping to transform the way we look at time across the business. Our purpose is to help the company do all it can to finish right, on time, every time. That's about how our people plan, what our

processes need us to do, and how we can help people be confident in how they plan: in fact, everything that can move us forward to ultimately deliver projects on time."

Over the past year, the activities of the time team included facilitating a wholesale change of planning platform from Microsoft Project to Asta Powerproject, along with delivering guidance and commencing training to help engage all Willmott Dixon staff to support planning excellence.

With the active support of Willmott Dixon Construction's COO John Waterman, the process has gathered significant momentum and is already engaging more than 800 people and planners in its Construction business alone.

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The grassroots view

Willmott Dixon had formerly used MS Project as its de facto standard planning tool. Part of heralding a new era of planning was to decide if this could support them fully in the future. However, neither Paul nor the leadership felt that a top-down decision was appropriate. All divisions were moving at different paces yet all tending towards Asta Powerproject, with Homes and Interiors having made decisions to change by the end of 2015. Gaining a grassroots view was known to be valuable; the Homes team had asked for input at a previous management conference, and found that the majority in the room favoured a move to Asta Powerproject, while Interiors as a relatively small business had made the switch already.

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In the largest division, Construction, its COO John Waterman felt that the decision should be made by the whole company. Paul relates the story: “We started by consulting with a number of people who were directly impacted by what software we use to manage time and do our planning with, and in those discussions we looked at the main options that were available, from staying with MS Project to moving to Asta Powerproject. Pretty universally, they all wanted to move to Asta Powerproject.” The FIIT Time team agreed: “As a team, we believed that Asta Powerproject

was best for a number of reasons, and we presented the case of the benefits of moving as well as the benefits of staying with MS Project to the rest of the company. We surveyed the whole construction business early in 2016, and we had a really good response from between 200 and 300 people who were involved with planning. 98% of those who responded said they’d like to move to Asta Powerproject. That included people who had never used it, but were interested in advantages we saw, both immediately and also into the future.”

The smart business choice

Choosing the right tool for approaching a thousand users was a huge responsibility, but also a significant business decision. Paul elaborated on the scale of the challenge: “In construction alone we had over 800 people as potential users, in that they had a MS Project licence on their work PC or laptop. We had a lot of people in that group who would use planning software day in, day out, and others who were more occasional users. The active regular users numbered maybe 400-500, ranging from planners who use it every single day to project leads, project managers and operations managers, who might use it once or twice per week, as well as others who need to open programmes to view them.”

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proved to be a sensible business decision. Paul commented that “With MS Project we had to have full licences, even if someone just wanted to view the programme natively. We did the calculations and found Asta Powerproject was a more cost-effective licensing opportunity. All our heavy day-to-day users could have a full standalone version, so they can use it offline and to their heart’s content while the concurrent user licensing gave us a cost-effective solution for those who only use it occasionally. For those who just used the application to view, but not to draw bars, the Asta Powerproject free viewer was really useful. You can basically give access to anyone who is involved in planning.”

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This meant that the tool would support not just ability to plan, but the FIIT Time team’s cultural ambition. Paul explained that “One of our mantras at FIIT Time is: everyone can plan. One of the things we do in the FIIT Time team is look at how everyone can plan. Some just need to view plans, in order to be part of that movement. This allowed us to do it in



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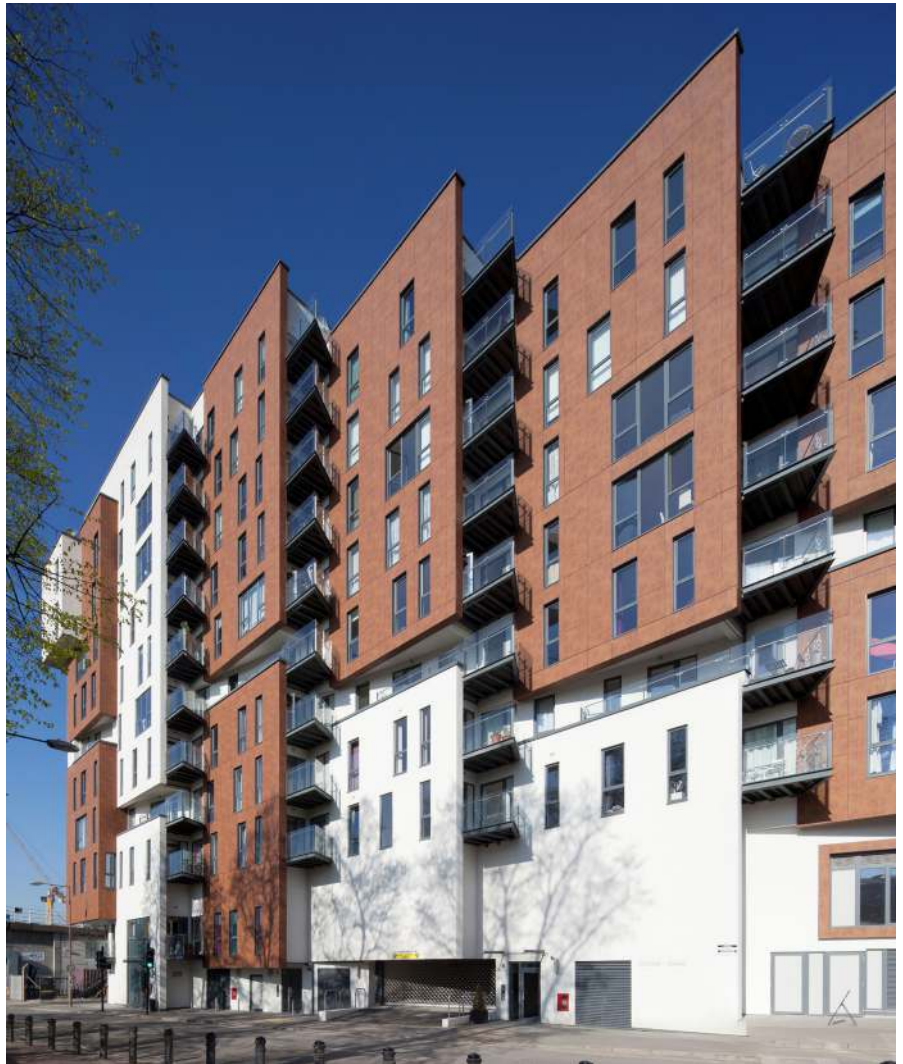
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cost-effective way and give more people access to time, it really helped to build the culture we are working on.”

The right change partner

Changing software for a process that is so much a part of day-to-day operations had to be handled carefully. Willmott Dixon’s FIIT Time team developed a strong working relationship with Elecosoft in order to roll out the software efficiently. Sales Manager Ben Taunt led the Elecosoft team to ensure the changeover would be smooth. Paul outlined the relationship dynamics, saying that: “Elecosoft not only talked to us about what Asta Powerproject could do but also listened to what we already did. We had made the most of what MS Project could do for us and wanted to continue some of the things we liked. Elecosoft worked with us to develop our own interface template, so our users didn’t have to understand how the software worked behind the scenes, just as we had done before. We got the best of both worlds: we could take advantage of extra advantages the software could give us, but tailor it in a way that looked familiar to those who’d never used it before. That way, the world doesn’t suddenly fall apart. We didn’t turn off the old software instantly but did it progressively; we controlled access to knowledge for different people. We were then able to ease them across, instead of them opening their machine one day to find it all looks different.”

The experience of change was as dependent on the ongoing support as from the consultancy team itself, Paul believes: “there are not many customer services where people are genuinely as helpful as you can possibly imagine. Sometimes you chop and change what you want. The Elecosoft team was always on the other end as we constantly tweaked and changed what we wanted. We took time to find



our feet, and work out what suited us. All through that process they were constantly helpful.”

He continued: “It’s almost seamless. If I ask a question about licensing, I know I can trust that I’ll get an answer, they’ll approach me with the right rates and with the discounts we’ve agreed, so I don’t have to go back to square one every time.”

Creating an effective training regime would be critical to a smooth roll-out. Paul’s team worked with Elecosoft to develop the right approach. Paul told us: “We run our own training internally, but realised that in this case we could have 1500 people or more to train quite quickly, not just across the three parts of the business but because we might offer training to partners too.

We decided to use Elecosoft’s training offering to help us and, with their help, customised it. We developed our template, then they tailored their training around that. We explained how our people operate, so they could put the right slant on the training. We developed some for planners, who need all the detail, and others for site teams who want to go less deep on some things and wider on others.”

Willmott Dixon developed an excellent dialogue with trainer Lee Butler, as they planned how to touch lots of people with software that was new to them, as well as to those who had previous experience with Asta Powerproject. Paul has been pleased with the results: “The feedback is really, really positive. Everyone says that they enjoy it and that it covers the ground well – it’s a

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lot to cover, especially in one day. It's really efficient; whenever we make a request for training we're juggling the attendee availability and the locations. Elecosoft is very accommodating, so it's an easy process to say where we want it to be, that we want to move it, or change it a bit. From a customer service perspective, from the start to what we do now, we wouldn't ask for more."

A 4D planning future

Willmott Dixon is on a BIM journey. It believes it is important to do more than simply talk BIM and 4D. Paul commented that he thinks "there are two types of 4D BIM - there's the 'Hollywood 4D' which is little more than the sales pitch, and there is 'Builders 4D' - which is perhaps less pretty, but focuses on the pinch points, the risks, and supports real planning."

Ensuring that the software choice would support strategic directions such as BIM and digital construction was a clear business priority. Paul reflected that "When we understood that Asta Powerproject had the 4D BIM module, as well as Site Progress Mobile and things like business intelligence, we realised that when we were ready for BIM it would enable us to take advantage of them all. We asked Elecosoft to come in and help us see what the future might look like, then had some BIM 4D training. The help they gave us helped us kick it off. Now we are trying to share

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best practices and our learnings, and we are starting to generate some real expertise."

The pilot activities are now well underway, according to Paul. "We are now starting to use the BIM module of Asta Powerproject across construction, housing and interiors and now have at least one BIM licence in every single office. We've set up a formal pilot to learn together how to be the best we can at creating 4D plans. The thing that makes the difference is that 4D planning is all in one application - don't underestimate the advantage of that. Plus, the product is constantly upgrading and improving so we don't need to learn another application or package, as we would have previously - that gives us a long term capability we can rely on."

Taking advantage of the integration and inter-operational benefits of the wider Asta Powerproject suite is another opportunity, Paul added: "We're now actively using Site Progress Mobile in parts of the business, and finding our feet. One region is using it actively on a construction project and we've just purchased more licences to start using it in another region - these example cases are helping us see what we can do."

The FIIT Time team is realising that this site progress software could help them in its aim of involving new constituents in the planning process, as Paul described: "We also realised that Site Progress Mobile could be put not just in the hands of build managers, but also our commercial team and quantity surveyors. They are familiar with spreadsheets but less so with programme bars - so we can export information to a web browser and show them information in a familiar table style. It is connecting them to the programme using Site Progress Mobile - something that already exists, that we are using in a way we hadn't previously imagined."

As the roll-out of Asta Powerproject

continues, the FIIT Time team also continues its wider work to embed excellent planning and time management into every facet of Willmott Dixon operations. With active senior management support, an enterprise-wide commitment to a common planning approach and platform, and the strides made in enabling planning involvement by all, the team is proving that time is more than just project-critical, but can be part of planning the business' future.

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About Elecosoft

Elecosoft is a leading international provider of software and related services to the architectural, engineering, construction and retail industries.

Our core product, Asta Powerproject, provides solutions for managing any size and any type of project and is widely recognised as one of the world's leading project management software solutions for construction.

More information about Elecosoft and its products can be found at elecosoft.com.

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