



London Borough of Brent

Building Control and Consultancy Services

Maximising Efficiency through Changing Working Practices and Home Working



Wembley Stadium

Building Control Consultancy Services (BCCS) has a legal duty to ensure that any building work in the borough of Brent is carried out to the highest standards of design and construction and in line with regulations. This is done by assessing and approving plans and regularly inspecting building work on site. At the time of this review, BCCS also had responsibility for overseeing the construction of the largest building project in Europe, the Wembley Stadium Complex.

The Competitive Environment

BCCS operate in a commercial environment competing against private surveyor companies. In addition to competing for scarce professional resources, BCCS also compete for contracts where the price, marketing skills, quality and speed of service delivery are key elements to winning business. The unit consists of four teams of surveyors each with a manager together with admin and finance staff. They handle approximately 2000 'large' applications and more than 3,500 'other' applications each year, with volumes increasing year on year. Many of the surveyors were contractors as BCCS found it difficult to recruit qualified staff against the higher salaries offered by commercial survey companies and with a high turn-over of staff and some posts remaining vacant, this has led to low levels of productivity and high levels of overtime with the resultant increase in costs.

The office environment was poor with desks and other surfaces covered with files and documents and many were often mislaid and lost. A new operations system had been installed for surveyors but it was not fully implemented and therefore little used. There was insufficient office space for the headcount resulting in a cluttered and cramped working environment and a manual filing system already at full capacity. With concerns about the increasing workloads and recruitment issues, and the lure of commercial surveying companies with modern offices and technology, the morale and productivity of BCCS surveyors was poor. Senior BCCS management recognised the urgent need for change and asked Steve Wright*, an independent management consultant to recommend changes that would maximise efficiency.

Internal Management Issues

Steve's initial assessment found many issues with current working practices, administration, management and technology that seriously impacted unit efficiency and costs. Although an internet based surveyor management system had been installed in BCCS, the system was not used to provide surveyor work schedules or diary events and surveyors were still using paper based schedules, files and plans. As a result surveyors updated the IT system infrequently and often asked Admin staff to



enter their hand written Job Cards and Site Record Notes with the resultant issues of legibility, data accuracy and missing cards. Even those surveyors that did use the system still used and filed the manual Job Cards hence incurring double entry effort. The new IT system was therefore unreliable as a reporting tool, for performance reviews and monitoring.

Surveyors would draft customer correspondence and reports by hand and pass them to Admin to be typed, often resulting in a turnaround time in excess of two days particularly when further editing or correction was required. There is a legal requirement to keep all application documentation but weak process controls when files were taken out resulted in many being either lost or left lying on desks often causing serious delays to application progression or client enquiries. A shortage of managers in the unit also placed added strain on the effective control of operations with procedures not followed, little formal staff reporting and staff appraisals not carried out. These and many more issues demanded a new approach to operations and management.

The Solutions

From the summary of issues above many of the solutions are relatively obvious to implement. However, to address the issues of office space and improve surveyor productivity the following recommendations were implemented by BCCS:

- Complete the implementation of the new operations IT system, using it to automate processes wherever possible, deliver user training and enforce surveyors to use the system as it was intended, thus enabling effective operations and management controls,
- Remove the culture of 'paper' by digitally capturing (scanning) all applications documentation and plans, and making them accessible via the operations IT system,
- Restructure from five to three teams to enable more effective allocation of resources and reduce costs,
- Following a successful Pilot that demonstrated significant improvements in productivity, flexible working arrangements (home working) has been introduced whereby surveyors with an appropriate home environment and internet access to BCCS office systems could chose to work from home and arrange their work schedules and site visits to avoid peak time travel. This has enabled BCCS to recruit surveyors from outside the borough, (other London councils have employed surveyors from areas such as Devon to assess electronic plans).
- New technology (notebooks) has been provided to give surveyors on-line access to BCCS IT data systems to enter data during site visits,
- Historic files have been digitised to free up physical storage space,
- Surveyors undertake their own typing to reduce correspondence delays,
- New operating processes and procedures were documented and enforced,
- Appropriate individual and team performance targets have been identified against which they are evaluated,
- The visual image of the office has been improved and redesigned to include 'hot desks' (ratio 1 : 3 surveyors), additional space providing personal storage units, training area, print room and plans inspection area with large plasma monitors for complex plan inspections, etc.

In terms of daily site visits and other performance targets these changes have achieved a productivity increase in excess of 35%.

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