



# ASSET MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS – A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Graeme Reid, Director, Hub Asset Management

*The most common complaint we hear from customers is that they don't use their asset management (AM) software because it's too complicated and doesn't actually provide them with the information they need anyway. Too many of the systems out there are developed by large IT companies with highly-skilled developers but with no understanding of the actual needs of their end-users. Their systems are overly complex and, very often, are a bolt-on as part of a larger housing management system and so come as part of the 'package'.*

AM providers need to understand what it is their end-users actually want, they need to know how they will use the system, and which data is important to them and which isn't, so a background in housing and property rather than IT is key.

At Hub, we are unusual in that we have come into the sector from a surveying background and initially developed Hub for our own purposes to meet the demand we were receiving from our RSL customers. It soon became clear that many of our clients were unhappy with their existing AM systems because they didn't provide them with the information they needed to meet ever-changing regulatory requirements in a simple and accessible way. Hub evolved to address this need and many of our customers now run Hub alongside their main housing systems.

There are a number of key issues that have come out of our increased knowledge and presence in the market:

- The AM system is only as good as the data that informs it and so it's essential to know where your source data comes from and be confident that it is robust, up-to-date and accessible. There should be a clear audit trail from out-

turn reports back to the source data and this audit trail should be accessible to users and external audit bodies so when the regulator comes calling and says 'prove it!', users can simply point them in the direction of their AM system, confident that it will tell them all they need to know.

- The AM system should link to a compatible data collection method to allow property data to be kept up-to-date, either by internally-resourced surveys or via externally-appointed organisations using a stipulated data collection platform. This keeps costs down, ensures end-users have control over what data is being collected, and keeps the AM outputs current.
- The AM provider needs to understand the whole process, from data capture to AM outputs. Developers have a tendency to over-engineer processes, adding in more bells and whistles than are needed or that the end-user understands. The AM system is not a demonstration of how clever the provider's developers are; it's a tool that should address the end-users' specific needs and ease much of the burden of delivering them.
- Simple doesn't mean unsophisticated. In our case, Hub grew from a simple database designed to provide 30-year cost projections and we added functionality and processes that we were being asked for by our clients but kept true to the core purpose for which it was created. End-users don't tend to be IT professionals and so keeping the user interface as easy and intuitive as possible while ensuring the appropriate processes were being carried out 'under the bonnet' was key to our progress. For example, during a demonstration to a recent new customer of ours, at the end of the session they said, "Don't take this the wrong way, but it seems very simple"; that is exactly what you should be

aiming for, as that customer is now happily logging in and using Hub on a daily basis.

- In a similar vein, a customer was keen to implement Hub Mobile, our data capture tool for Android smartphones. Their intention was to use one of their maintenance inspectors to carry out surveys when he was visiting properties during the normal course of his duties. When initially presented with a smartphone app, his face drained of colour and he expressed concern over his ability to use technology. By keeping the app simple, clear and very user friendly, he is now confidently carrying out surveys every day.
- Communication is key. Development of any AM system should be guided by what the end-users need, not what the AM provider thinks they want. In order to do this, it's essential that AM providers talk to all of their end-users on a regular basis in order to better understand how they use the AM system and what they need from it.

I'm not suggesting that there is no room or requirement for complex and elaborate systems but the key factor should always remain that they should meet the specific needs of the end-user and be appropriate for the size and complexity of the organisation for whom it is provided. After all, you don't always need to buy a Ferrari when all you need is a Mondeo!

*Graeme Reid is a director of Hub Asset Management.*