

IT transition programme projected to make savings in excess of £100m

risk

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For the past 18 months James de Watteville has been the Interim Manager for what has been described as ‘probably the most complex IT transition ever undertaken in the UK government’.

As the programme nears completion, de Watteville is credited with ‘achieving a tremendous result’ – delivering the switch to a streamlined set of suppliers that is projected to make savings in excess of £100 million for the Ministry of Justice over seven years.

de Watteville was brought in by the Ministry to push through its transition to new IT suppliers, an intricate programme whose unique challenges – both technical and in terms of business engagement – called for an exceptional individual with matchless communication skills and an outstanding record in delivering complex change.

“There will not be many projects this difficult,” according to Yvonne Gallagher, Chief Information Officer at the Ministry, who says the role required “a unique combination of an understanding of the service management environment and the technical complexity, as well as the commercial knowledge and expertise to move the project forward with a number of different suppliers with different objectives.”

de Watteville’s remit was to deliver the smooth transition from eight outgoing suppliers, whose contracts with the former Department of Constitutional Affairs would soon expire, to just two – without a hiccup. In less than two

years the infrastructure has now been switched to one supplier and the bulk of the applications to a second. The programme has been delivered within budget with no major disruptions to live service.

In de Watteville’s words, “The DCA itself was built up over a number of years so there were three completely different networks across the country, three different service desks and several different types of contract. It was very piecemeal and difficult to manage. Now we have one type of contract, one national network and one national helpdesk. We’ll also have one common desktop.”

From the start, de Watteville, a very personable and well-connected father of six, instilled confidence in the Department. “The Department was conscious of the enormity of the task and the associated risk should transition not run smoothly,” he says. “They knew that if the relationship between the suppliers broke down, it would mean the same as for any other organisation: corporate meltdown. Services to the public would suffer with significant consequences for the smooth running of the Justice System.”

At the same time, he says, it was precisely the challenge of this tension between the suppliers that motivated him to get involved. “For me the unique and fascinating thing about this project is that about 10 suppliers were involved: two incoming and eight outgoing, and each had their own agenda or culture. They had to be made to work cooperatively,” says de Watteville, who led a transition team of 70.

success

Top-notch communication skills and sharp commercial instinct enabled delivery of complex change

“The suppliers who were providing the service previously were hesitant to hand it over. Naturally they were nervous about the continuity of service, and of course whilst they continued to deliver services they continued to get paid!” he says. “Trying to get all parties to work together required the very depths of my softer skills in terms of relationship management and getting people to communicate and cooperate.”

He notes that the incoming suppliers emerge from the transition of service with their ‘reputations intact’. de Watteville says that a key success factor for him was that they had a solid foundation to build upon during the remaining six years of their contracts.

Yvonne Gallagher adds: “We had eight key suppliers and new suppliers coming in and it was very important that they felt they were dealing with someone who knew exactly what they were doing and who they would have a lot of respect for. James [de Watteville] had that credibility.”

“At the same time,” she says, “he had to be very focused and forceful about what he was doing. He knew what he had to do and he was very strong in doing it.”

Crucially, de Watteville also kept stakeholders informed and involved at every stage of the process, she says.

She is in no doubt that, in a civil service culture where outside contractors and consultants are often viewed with suspicion, de Watteville’s personal effectiveness and proven capability were invaluable. “The team and project manager declared themselves delighted to be working with James, and felt they could learn a lot from him so that was very important.”

de Watteville’s top-notch communication skills and sharp commercial instinct enabled him to deliver complex change in a tight timescale and despite extremely difficult circumstances.

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