

Wiltshire College

Merger and devolvement goals prompt Wiltshire College to select Symmetry Financials

Background

Wiltshire College was formed in 2000 and is now, following its merger with Salisbury College in January 2008, the main provider of further and higher education in Wiltshire, with an excellent reputation for quality provision, innovation and student care.

With over 3,300 full-time students and 6,000 part-time students, Wiltshire College has 4 main campuses at Trowbridge, Lackham, Chippenham and Salisbury with 9 smaller centres throughout the county.

Key challenge

A merger meant the College needed a new finance system that could be easily accessed across multiple sites. Finance Manager (Systems Development) at Wiltshire College, Colleen Russell explained, "We realised that we would now have two disparate finance systems, our existing one based in Trowbridge and another one in Salisbury. We had two choices. We could either attempt to integrate the two or we could look to replace both with a brand new system that could also give us increased functionality and new benefits."

Evaluation and selection

Five vendors' solutions were reviewed against the College's requirements including devolvement & improved reporting. Colleen says, "We decided that during what would be a period of extensive re-structuring it would make more sense to start from scratch with a new system that could also help us meet some of our short and long term finance objectives including

devolvement and support for on-line payments further down the line."

The College went out to tender with the following key wish list:-

- Browser-based system that could be accessed via any site
- Live on-line reporting for budget holders
- System that allowed devolvement to non-finance users
- Electronic-based purchase order requisition
- Electronic-based purchase invoice approval
- Support for scanning and retrieval of financial documents
- Cash management
- Integration and uploading of data between finance and other key applications such as Student Records System, HR etc.
- Paperless accounting
- Support for Activity Based Accounting

Of all the contenders, Symmetry scored the highest and was the best fit. Colleen comments, "We felt that our incumbent system was not originally designed for the Education sector so half the functionality just wasn't relevant. The functionality within Symmetry Financials has been built to specifically reflect the commercial needs of Colleges so we felt that the features offered by the software were best fit to our requirements."

The implementation

Colleen recalls, "The implementation took a remarkable six months bearing in mind that at the same time the College underwent massive re-structuring. We found the support from Symmetry's consultants outstanding and were reassured by the detail and processes behind the overall project management. We found Symmetry to be very approachable and felt that because they already had in-depth knowledge of the FE sector they understood exactly what we wanted from the system."

Key benefits

Devolved accounting

Colleen Russell commented "As part of the College's key objectives we are looking to empower staff and give budget holders better access and control of their financial data. With the new system from Symmetry we aim to reduce paper work significantly allowing up to 200 non-finance users to log in and raise purchase orders on-line. We have multiple sites so having the ability to scan documents and attach them to records has led to us having better control over where documents are within the College, and to improve the time taken to get signed authorisations". With over 20,000 invoices and orders processed by the College every year, this will result in significant time and cost-savings.

"The Portal functionality within Symmetry Financials was especially attractive because it means that different departments can review their budgets themselves on a web page and also print off customised reports without having to involve finance personnel, who can therefore spend more time on more valuable tasks." Symmetry's Portal feature is an on-line dashboard of finance information that is personalised according to the needs of the user. According to Colleen, "Everyone was really keen on the concept of Portal and thrilled by the demo that was given."

Flexible reporting

Reporting is also expected to improve for budget holders, senior management and the College's own trading entities such as the restaurant, theatre and hair and beauty salons. Colleen Russell relates, "We found with the old system it was difficult to get the reports we wanted and it was expensive to make changes. With Symmetry Financials, reporting can be personalised according to different users and distribution can be automated and sent out via email or accessed from Portal, so less time is spent on collating reports by the finance team. We also expect the quality of data to be higher than previously."

Going green

"We use a phenomenal amount of paper throughout the College" says Colleen, "so as part of a drive to cut down usage, Symmetry Financials will reduce the paper trail with new functionality such as electronic authorisation of purchase orders and electronic invoicing." It is also expected that by holding and distributing documents electronically there will be less paperwork lost and smaller delays in processing and waiting for items to be signed off.

Integrated systems

Using Symmetry's EasyLink facility, the College can link easily between the core finance system and other key applications such as the Student Records System, Payroll, HR Systems and in the future with electronic tills ensuring that all data is updated simultaneously without the need for re-keying. Where occasional transfer of data is required such as salary information from the HR to the finance system, then the College takes advantage of Symmetry's Journal Upload functionality which Colleen describes as "really effective and easy to set up".

The future

Colleen concludes, "We are confident that it will be a long-term relationship. Symmetry always listens to what you want and all feedback is then reflected in the next release of the software which we can then upgrade to. One of the benefits of dealing direct with the supplier is that any problems or queries are quickly processed either face-to-face, on the phone or with the help of tools such as remote diagnostics. Symmetry has certainly ticked all the boxes."

