



Accountable Technology



APS Case Studies

Grant Thornton - Auckland

Interviewees:

Les Corder – Partner

Margaret Fisher – Practice Manager

Sharlene Rowsell – Practice Accountant

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Involvement in selection process:

Both Margaret and Sharlene were heavily involved in the process – together they were responsible for carrying out the base research on APS Advance and Sharlene also carried out reference checks with other users. The Practice Accountant, Sharlene was fully involved in the review of the features of the product in terms of reporting and functionality – seeking to identify clearly what the product could and couldn't do. Once these exhaustive tests were completed, Margaret and Sharlene set out the business case – which was comprehensive and included comparisons to other products in the market. This was important because there were compelling financial reasons why the firm should have stayed with Sol6. The business case showed, in the longer term, APS was more advantageous to the practice. Following presentation of the business case, meetings ensued with Les Corder (IT Partner) and two other partners that make up the IT committee. The IT Committee reviewed the APS product – and it was then that the product started to sell itself. The whole selection process took around 18 months.

Key Quote

APS put all the contracts & details in place, communication, meetings, project plans and worked with us 'the client', not keeping the project plan to themselves. We always knew where they were up to, and the support exceeded our expectations. Working that way, in conjunction with us, is a very effective, professional and efficient way of implementing the system.

Section One General

When did your firm implement its APS Advance Practice Management system
1st January 2003

Which edition did your firm sign up for – a) Professional or b) Enterprise
Advance Professional edition

How many users do you have?
85 users

Which APS products have you taken out licences to use? (PM, Tax etc...)
Advance Practice Management and Practice IQ, and we are reviewing Tax and XPA at some stage

Who was your previous supplier and how long were you using that supplier's software for?
We have been using Solution 6's Practice Management product for around 10 years. We have been using other Solution 6 products too (e.g. general ledger management accounting (MAS) - we were the first PC users in NZ on that system (20 years ago).

From start to finish, how long did the meeting, testing and decision-making process take that saw you move over to APS?
It took about 18 months but I would think the first approaches were when we started talking about it a couple of years prior to that.

Was your decision to move over to APS made on gut-feel, or was it more scientific than that? Please explain how you went about making your decision...(e.g. team approach: IT manager, IT Partner, Work Group etc...)
It was more scientific but there was a good gut-feel after our initial discussions with the APS Business Development people. Thereafter we proceeded to do quite a lot of research both in NZ and Australia, alongside our discussions with APS. We reviewed the software and compared features and reports, involving a number of people. We formed a review team who looked at the product including the Accounting staff, Partners the System administrator, the IT manager and also Secretaries. So we involved a number of our people in looking at it, but one of the most important things for us were discussions we had with Advance users - APS has a fairly committed user base. There are many users of the different accounting systems in the market, whether or not they're chartered accountants or whatever. Of the number of accounting systems or financial systems in use, if a review of the users is conducted, you'll get extremes from both negative feedback to being quite positive. What we found with the APS user group was that everybody was positive.

One of the other things that we recognised internally was the importance of noting those who may need some 'coaching' to buy in to the system and the change. When you get those people on side they are good to have as part of any review team. Because then its easy for them to readily see the advantages and makes it a lot easier to sell it throughout the firm.

Now that you have been using APS products for almost 6 months, has the product and service met your expectations? If so, please tell me about it

The service has been very good from a customer point of view, as has been the project management and also Advance support – either on site or by phone. Regarding the product, after 5 months of use, we're still getting to know all the features, how they work, how they run etc. We're just working through how we are using the system and assessing what we're doing with it at the moment. But overall, we use more and more features each month. We believe that our expectations have been met, and well managed. Like any product you start using, there are some great things but also some

functions of our previous software that suited our practice better. Generally speaking I think that people find it easy to use and are adjusting to the change.

APS prides itself on its ability to listen to its customers regarding their business needs and business aims and its commitment to then work closely with customers to meet and achieve them. Tell us about the APS approach from your perspective.

It was definitely your approach. I don't think there's any conflict on that. We made it quite clear that because of our history in changing from UDS to OBM to Solution 6 Practice Management, we had been doing things basically the same way for the last 20 years. So we were looking for a lot more positive input from your team about ideas as to what we could be doing - best practice. Now I guess in a couple of meetings, we were looking to get some guidance which wasn't forthcoming but that's not a criticism. I can understand why when there were two or more ways of doing it. We stuck with one way and that hasn't caused us any problems. APS's management of the implementation project was fantastic. Our only comment, not a criticism, was instead of saying "look guys this is really the way to do it", it was more like "what would you prefer?" In some instances the APS person should probably have been more assertive. Having said that, she was absolutely brilliant – just tremendous.

Section Two Product

Functionality Testing

Looking at APS from a product perspective, what were the most important factors from a functionality point-of-view that were seen as critical to your business – the things that APS had to have if it was to be considered as a your practice management and tax preparation software provider?

It's a level up from that. We were looking for a stable software package that is being improved, and able to handle the growth of the practice. From an actual functionality point of view, we sought a better reporting, more user-friendly and a better billing / costing system.

Did you feel that APS was ahead of its competitors in terms of its functionality and how did you verify the fact? (e.g. pilot / product testing methodology)

I'm not sure of that. With all of the products we looked at, we didn't necessarily review them in such depth. If you are talking about are you ahead of the competitors, yes you are ahead of Solution 6 PMA. More importantly, the fact that Advance is regarded as a good, stable product was key to us. Of course, how it was going to be delivered and supported was also important to us. Some other products appeared to have great functionality and possibly more functions than Advance but were not in use by the professional accounting market in NZ.

The other thing we noted – and I know we're talking about the product but the two go hand in hand - is what representations are made about the product from the supplier. We didn't get consistent stories from some other suppliers we had in-depth discussions with. From APS we got consistency of information and had reasonable comfort levels that your people would say it the way it is, which is good because the last thing you want to do is get APS's reputation beaten up by over-promising – it wouldn't be worth it. However, in dealing with another supplier, the information provided was inconsistent to the point that they promoted different products at different times as the best solution for us. Another product offering from them came very late in the piece. We were told it wouldn't suit us but I understand that in Australia Solution 6 is actively marketing it to firms that have 90+ personnel so I'm not sure exactly where or why the change in strategy.

How long did you pilot and test the Advance product set for functionality – and how many people were involved? Was the APS team accommodating in this process or did your APS contacts press you to make an early decision?

The first review we carried out would have been in 2001 and involved a team of about seven people from across the practice, involving quite detailed questions and answers, looking at the functions and reports. And then in 2002 we ran a shortened review to catch up with the updates, that was July and the decision was made in September.

We felt comfortable with the APS team. If anything you emphasised the need for change management, which we already knew, but the fact that you did meant we were singing from the same page.

Did testing the Advance product set provide any positive surprises in terms of embedded functionality that you did not know about..... functionality that could help your business in a way that a PM system had not previously?

Yes, we were a bit lucky as before we arrived at the pilot testing stage we actually knew a little about the product. Practice IQ has been a stand out. It's an exciting product and we're able to access information we couldn't previously.

For your firm, what were the 3 critical things that the APS Advance product offers over the competition that helped finalise the decision to go with APS in place of your incumbent supplier?

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Ease-of-Use Testing

From a functionality point of view you have told us why you moved to APS. Ease-of-use is also important: how did you make sure that Advance is easy-to-use from a practitioners' perspective?

Well I have to say that I'm not using expletives doing my timesheet any more. I used to get so frustrated with working in MS Outlook (Windows) then going into Solution 6 (DOS – case sensitive) when you have to be in caps. That frustration has disappeared with Advance timesheets.

Future Development

What would you like to see APS add to its product set in its next releases of Advance that will assist your business?

One thing that is not as flexible as it could be is the Workflow reporting, e.g. to get a complete view of the work outstanding for a partner, we need to run several reports, which don't then format well when exported to MS Excel. Reporting on narrations could be improved, although I understand APS is currently extending the internal matters area of the system.

Our feeling on that question right now is that it could be a little premature for us to give you a full and detailed response. We are actually still working through the implementation and getting around it, working on Practice IQ and trying to extract more information each month. I don't think we're yet in a position to take the "helicopter" view at what the system can provide and what we want for the efficiency of the practice. For instance, one of our Australian offices apparently has been working quite extensively with your guys over there on their Database and getting marketing information out of it. We have a national marketing committee and an internal marketing committee and there's a heap of information that we're still not keeping in Advance. So while there's still a lot of gaps in our database, we can't data mine properly until that's complete. The impression that I get, and I've seen nothing thus far to alter that impression, is that you are closer to your customers and their needs and able to cover most of the things that customers require. I think where you have an opportunity is to continue to develop leadership in the market place by providing the system and information in and around your customers needs. We really wanted to use a product which is continually being enhanced and that is why we wanted to utilise Advance.

Section Three Corporate Situation

Were the following factors important to you in determining if APS was the right provider for GT to go with:-

The fact that APS is a profitable business? APS prides itself on the fact that it has posted a profit every year since inception in 1991

Yes, but not too much. There's more to a company's success than simply the profitability of the business. Stability is important. One issue previously was looking up the ASX website to find out what was happening about Stockford, its announcements and where APS was at with their reported divestment of parts of Stockford's business etc. There was a real concern about what was APS's future and that outcome was something that was focused on at that point in time. Had APS been sold to a multi-national, like an English firm or something similar, it would create a nervous situation. What usually happens then is that they don't know, or probably care about, our marketplace. That's where you see strategies developed at arms length and different policies put in place, not all of which are actually aimed at maintaining or increasing customer satisfaction. So the fact that the company was bought out by the management was a plus from our perspective.

The fact that the Advance product set traces its lineage and development path directly to its first release in 1994 there has been no deviation from the product roadmap – merely incremental annual upgrades to the product. This has meant that customers have not had to waste time and money implementing new systems on an intermittent basis

Every time you have to make a change there's always an impact. There will be needs to make changes and it seems that what APS is doing is a process of continuous improvement. If some things get better we'll adopt them and get on with it. We realise that we have to do it, and you know there is pain & gain. What we do want to see is continuing positive change and know that you are actually looking at the product and trying to make it better for us. That's important. We know from what we talked about with a number of other users that you are getting some ideas. While some may be straight user specific, others will actually be really good ideas and that's what we would want to see adopted. One of the frustrations we had with Sol6 was that all development strategy was set in Australia and when you wanted a change it went on a list. It seems that we could wait for 2 years or more to get something so that's what we don't want to see. On the other hand we don't want to see our software supplier jumping at every client's needs and bringing out releases every 6 weeks either.

What other corporate stability factors would you recommend that firms should consider when choosing a Practice Management system supplier?

The day I'll get worried about APS as a corporate will be the day I see them out there offering significant discounts to competitors' users to bring them on board. As a marketing strategy, I think that would lower the value of the product where people will buy it for the wrong reasons.

One thing we viewed as positive was the other larger firms using APS's services, who APS values as clients and will work hard to look after them and offer them more into the future. To answer your question what I'm saying is just looking at the user group gives one comfort – we consider many of those members of similar quality. The APS User base is a major asset – all appear to be advocates of the Advance system.

From the view point of expectation, one of the big things that fail in any software implementation are mismatched expectations between the customer and the supplier. APS's communication was there to bridge any expectation gap. All the way through the implementation project we knew where we stood and hopefully your guys knew where we were at with everything. I think that's pretty important. Your implementation time was as you said it would be, and the product performed to our expectation so from that angle that's been good. APS put all the contracts & details in place, communication,



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meetings, project plans and worked with us 'the client', not keeping the project plan to themselves. We always knew where they were up to, and the support exceeded our expectations. Working that way, in conjunction with us, is a very effective, professional and efficient way of implementing the system.