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Client Hack Day with team PWS

Client hack days are a really great way for us to take a sticky problem our clients have and pull it apart to try and find a working solution. In some cases, with a little background research and prep, we're able to build a proof of concept in a day, and that was the case with our client PWS ...



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PWS is based in Newton Aycliffe. It's a fifth-generation family business and market leader in the design and supply of quality kitchen components and work surfaces to trade customers including manufacturers, retailers and installers. Part of the Danesmoor Group, PWS is the largest business within the Group's portfolio.

Of course, IT plays a huge part in their growth strategy, and PWS works to be fully self-sufficient, with its IT requirements being developed in-house – like the company's own ERP system – while also being supported through its partnership approach with the help of Waterstons.

Andrew Buckingham, the then Head of IT at PWS, came along to our customer Hack Day. As he said, it's a fantastic opportunity to explore a brief he and his team wouldn't normally justify spending the time on. It would allow him to focus intensively on a problem with the support of our team; working collaboratively to find a solution to the issue during a short window of opportunity, rather than it rumbling along on his list of things 'to do', and never quite finding the time to get around to it.

So, what was the brief? At the time, trade orders were placed over the phone with the customer service team or via the PWS website. Andrew was getting increasingly concerned that the sales process would become restrictive to PWS' customers, who are often out and about on a job when placing an order. It was also very admin-heavy for the business. He wanted to explore a solution which would allow his customers to place orders on the go, while linking into the website's functionality to process sales, keeping cash flowing through the business, and contributing to its financial targets without the need for any further admin support. Step forward Team PWS. Headed up by one of our Executive Software Consultants, Ross Dargan, we headed to Newton Aycliffe to meet Andrew and his team ahead of the Hack Day to talk through some initial ideas.

During the meeting, Andrew gave the team some really useful insight into PWS' customer profile, which helped massively in deciding on the best approach to find a solution to his order-placing challenge. PWS' customers were already experts at what they do and are loyal to the business. They use the printed directory as a point of reference, carrying it with them while on jobs, and need very little guidance on the actual type of product and quantities they need. Some even know the directory codes for their go-to products off-by-heart!

So, it was decided that this challenge wasn't about helping the customer to decide what products they needed for a job. Rather, it was about facilitating a swift sales process for trade customers without them needing to call customer services or visiting the website to be able to place an order.

Team PWS arrived at the idea of an app that would allow trade customers to scan a page in the printed directory. The app would then read the page and interface with the website to pull up the different products specifically on that page. Fields would pre-populate with quantities, sizes and so on – literally at the click of a button! The customer would be able to order the products that they needed. The info would then be sent back to the admin team via the website, without adding to any additional support staff overheads.



Thinking caps on!

To bring the plans to fruition, the team used a technology called Xamarin forms. It would them to write the app and give the end-user a native experience - looking and feeling as if the app was written for specific devices, regardless of whether you were viewing it on iOS, android or a Windows phone or desktop!



Other app development platforms are available!

With a great plan in place, the challenge for Team PWS was set. But before they began, Ross decided to shake things up... As one of the aims of our Hack Days is to allow our people to explore new ways of working and empowering them to take their newly-acquired skills forward. These skills could then be used by our consultants to help our clients during the normal working day. He therefore decided the roles in the team should be flipped on their head. The team ended up with people working on a mobile development project, who'd never done mobile development before, and with back-end developers designing for the front-end and vice versa.

The result? A total success! Just six short hours later, Andrew was presented with a workable proof of concept to take forward in his business. It would help to facilitate additional sales, while keeping admin requirements at its current level and so supporting business growth. While a few tweaks and updates needed to be made to the printed directory. QR codes and a few other clever bits would allow the app to work even better and hook up to the PWS back-end systems. PWS most certainly had a working proof of concept with legs to be able to pick up and run with it.



It's alive!

A great day had by all, a happy client, and in Andrew's words "a really worthwhile development experience". Could we ask for anything more? If you'd be interested in taking part in one of our client hack days, please do get in touch!