

BREAKFAST WITH THE EDITOR

Foreword by the Editor

I'm breaking with tradition a little bit, as the following interview was a little unexpected and I'd like to take you on the journey I have been on in the last few months.

Regular readers will know from the turn the tables interview I did, where I was interviewed, that my career in housing started when I was a young lad fresh from my degree, looking after the IT in a 4500 unit HA in Newcastle upon Tyne. The organization had separate systems for managing housing repairs and finance, none of which spoke to each other and none of which was best of breed.

This brought me onto my first procurement project, which I facilitated under the watchful eye of the FD (quite rightly too) which involved many demonstrations of software, including one from a company called MIS. MIS at the time were one of the big 8 suppliers with very prestigious customers including one who wanted to charge £65 per visitor for reference visits, to see the HAMIS character based housing system as they were such an example of good practice.

The demonstration day came for MIS and they had technical difficulties with their hardware kit (it was mostly character based systems then) and shortly into their demo, they abandoned ship. It goes without saying that they were not short-listed for the next stage of the procurement.

Well, I went on with my merry life, and moved jobs to North British (now Places for People) and then to IBS, then onwards to my now infamous independent career. Enough about me, I do go on don't I?

Anyway, during this period I became aware of MIS becoming less and less prominent. When I worked at IBS we converted MIS customers over to IBS and during a stint as Interim Head of ICT at mhs, they had just replaced HAMIS from MIS. At exhibitions over the last few years MIS have been noticeable by their absence.

A couple of months ago, I had prepared a presentation on the state of the market for a supplier's conference. I had made mention of the fact that I expected the number of systems to reduce due to sales, acquisitions, takeovers and general lack of development. I must admit, MIS was one such system I had in mind.

All of this sets the background for what happened next. I received an email from Tony Smith, MD of MIS, asking for rates for advertising and sponsorship, and the possibility of a breakfast interview. I have to admit, I was both surprised and intrigued. Why would a failing, clunky old character based system supplier, be interested in 6 month deals, when



surely shares in Northern Rock were safer than shares in MIS? Well, we arranged to meet up at Olympia to discuss it as I had questions and concerns.

Later at Olympia, I met up with him on the MIS ActiveH stand. He was brimming with confidence and excitement about the latest incarnation of his product. It was apparently a rewrite in SQL and was the new big thing. Well I have to say I was skeptical. He showed me a quick demo, and I had to admit, on the surface, it seemed to look good. Even from that short snapshot I could see it had some key things that other systems would love to have. The SQL Server platform gives it a level of interoperability with Office that would make most systems green with envy. The layout and concepts looked sound, and the screens were true windows, rather than some of the older looking systems out there. I was beginning to turn. I had pre-conceived ideas that were being eroded one by one. Well, we booked breakfast and I had a slightly more open mind at this point.

Breakfast was an interesting affair, as you will read. Tony came across as very genuine and unusually for an MD, quite down to earth. In the words I used on the day, Tony is either a really good PR guy, or he means what he says. Of the questions I asked, he answered honestly, even when the questions were difficult. He even agreed to let a cross section of MIS users see this article and comment on it direct to me, before printing, the theory being if he's bending the truth, they'll squeal. Tony commented that "I bet no supplier has offered you that before – we are a different type of supplier".

As I guessed, practically all email comments received were glowing so his confidence was not misplaced. So could this be the new player in town? Some of the leviathan diplodocus suppliers, secure in their ivory towers of arrogance that they're the best or they're the biggest are so sure that they will remain on top. MIS evidently punch well above their weight, fighting hard and delivering what they and their customers believe to be a good, tight, well respected system. It was apparent that the concepts of

customer service are at the heart of what Tony was telling me. I'm in a similar boat as an independent consultancy, fighting hard against the larger more established names.

Well, MIS are poised to take up the torch and sprint past some of the sleeping leviathans. I can't wait to hear the ivory tinkle as the towers crash to the floor. If what Tony was telling me rings true and permeates through the organization, which is my suspicion, I think they might just do it!

Tell me a little about yourself. This is the first time I have taken the breakfast interview in a rock and roll landmark!

Well The Smiths favourite of the Salford Lads club don't do food this early in the day, so we got second best, pretty close to our offices here in Northwich, Cheshire! We do have plenty of rock & roll landmarks around the North West with all that musical heritage. Maybe you should consider doing a breakfast desert island disks. I would have had an excuse to dig out a track from Houses of the Holy, Whodinis' Haunted House & of course the Stones 'Gimme Shelter'.

Not quite my tastes, but then if we all liked the same stuff, the charts would be boring. Sounds like music is a big part of your life, what are your interests, why this venue for our meeting?

I grew up on one of those satellite housing estates on the edge of Manchester in the 1970's and now being MD of a housing solution provider has quite literally brought me full circle. I have always seen my job as assisting to improve communities rather than just provide a housing management solution. Efficient, easy to use systems help deliver benefits that don't just improve isolated estates, it affects our own backyards and I am passionate in having everyone in our team at MIS-AMS work to that aim. It was a friend at a customer site who recently pointed out the connection that I probably feel like that because of my early years. In those early years I did spend far too much money on gigs and vinyl. I was too young to be one of the 42 at the mythical Sex Pistols gig at the Manchester lesser free Trade Hall, although did see Joy Division a couple of times. Photography has always been a big interest of mine & live gigs a particular speciality. As part of a City & Guilds photography course I undertook a three month project in my local night shelter, documenting the staff & the visitors. It really brought into focus for me what social housing was aiming to do.

I googled "Warrington Winter Night Shelter" in my preparation for the interview, it is pretty biting stuff. So what's your professional history?

Starting with an honours degree in applied computing from Manchester I worked many years as IT Manager for a medium sized European tank container company. We were dealing with blue chip customers like Shell Chemicals, BASF



Weaverdale Café, as used on cover of Charlatans 'Melting Pot' Album

and ICI where there were six or seven major competitors. I was responsible for a full overhaul of IT systems and implementation of ISO 9000. The experience gave me a fantastic insight into all aspects of business process and the central importance of the customer. We made service and customer care the difference between ourselves and the herd. On joining the MIS group I quickly fitted into a customer facing role and I found myself assimilating housing knowledge very quickly. In my eleven years with the company I have progressed to implementation manager and from October 2006, Managing Director.

Where did MIS start with housing systems?

The MIS group started back in 1981 and housing systems represents a significant part of its current turnover. The first housing system from MIS was HAMIS, a character based system, in 1989. It used the Universe/U2/Reality database which had it very fast and quite economical on hardware & resources needed to run it. Integration between modules was extremely tight and the environment made it very feature-rich. In 1997 the product had a makeover to add a more windows-esque skin over the product. In 2002, work started on a radical design of a full windows product.

Tell me about recent developments, why ActiveH as a name?

The name 'Active Housing' comes from the way from the start we made the new solution task and process based. We had the benefit of designing it in the 21st century so we could tailor it to all the current housing themes. It is obvious that products designed back in the 1990's would struggle to cope with Rent Restructuring, Decent Homes, Scottish Housing Quality Standard, NROSH etc, etc. From the start we had all of that stuff on our initial blueprint. Our user interface philosophy too, its explorer like feel (together with everything you expect to have in windows), also makes this such an easy solution to learn, use and work with. Too many systems these days use wizards for all processes, often making it quicker to offer users a web interface as it may be faster. We took time to use only the appropriate user interfaces which were needed. That's such a benefit for users. All our products can also be

accessed via web and this means that opening up tenant and contractor access to ActiveH, widening access and bringing efficiencies is really easy.

Did you keep the same underlying back end database design like some of the other suppliers?

No, we took time and put so much effort into a total rethink to give us a flexible, pretty close to fully normalised design that would take us forward a few decades and provide maximum flexibility for new housing needs and reporting. A database design from the previous decade when housing management was a lot simpler, a few estate walkabouts and judging the 'best kept garden competition' would have really held our customers back. All our users deserved better frankly.

Why choose Microsoft SQL Server specifically?

Reduced cost of ownership was a big factor in our choice. License costs are a fraction of Oracle, Ingres, Progress or Universe licences and it's such an easy platform to support. IT staff coming straight from college have all covered it and it's extremely scalable. Its openness is a great benefit too. We deliberately avoided using a 4GL type environment to develop our SQL server based solution to retain speed of use. I have seen some other SQL Server systems where users complain they wait 5 or more seconds for a response from a mouse click. In this day & age, that's clearly unacceptable. Our development using core Microsoft programming tools might take us 20% longer, but that means that all our customers can benefit from much faster response times, all the time. To the end user, the choice of database should be immaterial. SQL does plug us firmly into the future though with integrations to Active Directory, Exchange, Sharepoint etc. That will become increasingly an issue with other older more proprietary databases.

You claim that the use of Microsoft core functionality is a big difference between ActiveH and other HMS's are you a big advocate of Bill Gates then?

Quite the opposite personally! Given a selfish choice I would hitch my wagon up with Steve Jobs, but it's burying your head in the sand if you don't embrace all those other applications on the housing desktop. Too many housing management systems isolate themselves from Excel, Word, Outlook and Mappoint. We all remember Lotus 1-2-3 and WordPerfect and that many thought they were superior to Microsoft's offerings. It is lack of integration that really killed those products off. Every report, search and information list can be exported instantly to any office product available in ActiveH. Rather than a 'special' mail merge utility, ActiveH uses standard current versions of Word, giving rich functionality. A good test of your existing solution is what I call the '2 bed bungalow' test. If at your front reception a tenant or applicant asked a colleague "What 2 bed bungalows have you in x" (replace x with the

area, estate, scheme of your choice). How long would it take that person to get a list of them in Excel? In ActiveH it would be a few mouse clicks. If your user has to contact a Business Objects user or the IT department to get a CSV file, for example, that's a lot of time being wasted every day. Add it up and quantify it. If your HMS doesn't give your users the power, IT will be taking up the slack, this day and every day and aren't IT staff often the most expensive? That's one of the reasons we put together our 'rate your housing system' questionnaire on our website. It's a cold hard look at if the HMS meets 21st century standards. Too many RSLs put up with users having to recalculate debits that don't start on the 1st of the month or after a charge run crash etc. These things maybe could have been accommodated back in the 1990's, but today everyone is pushed to greater limits. The HMS has to be capable of shortening tasks, not the opposite and that's what we have managed to do in ActiveH

Recently MIS has been considered by some to have dropped off the radar. Can you tell me about some of the recent changes within the company?

We have certainly had a couple of years of consolidation, reassertion of direction and a complete review of our customer relationships. It was obvious to us that the new product line had to be completed and a smooth means of delivery put in place. Back in September 2005 we had a number of fundamental, necessary personnel changes and we had a lot to do in terms of tightening up delivery and completion of our all new SQL product range. We deliberately did not market for sometime to get it right. Our customers tell me they appreciated what we did. All of our management team has worked at MIS for 8 years or more and the current commitment to customers, colleagues and everything we are doing is just phenomenal.

What has customer reaction been. How are they reacting to the changes?

They have definitely noticed. Commitments & promises are now delivered on time, within budget and timescale. I haven't got fingers to count the number of compliments I have personally had from customers about how pleased they are about the changes we have made. I am sure any supplier would feel proud about some of the comments that drop out of our customers mouths. A statement like "When I call the ActiveH helpdesk I feel like your only customer" speaks volumes more than a corporate statement that a customer just puts their name to. That is what all of my team aims for though, every customer should feel like our only customer.

Several people have suggested that the MIS ActiveH housing system is one of 'Housings best kept secrets'. Is that a good thing?

I think that our customers have always known they have

been on to a good thing. In particular, our two largest customers Bromford and Walsall Housing Group have both seen real benefits from ActiveH and the agile, responsive customer service that we deliver and can see contrasts among their own larger RSL peer group. Marrying up an excellent product and true care and interest in helping the customers achieve best practice has been the cornerstone of our success.

How flexible is ActiveH for tackling emerging issues in housing?

We are certainly the best placed HMS to do so I would say. We already have a full mobile working solution, SMS text interface, ASB and Process solution. The development roadmap will increasingly further address a number of areas concerning community cohesion, neighbourhoods, the green agenda and the transition from decent homes to decent communities.

You cite integration, workflow & tasking as ActiveH top features. Do your customers generally use those areas to the full extent? One of the big failings of HA's is not using the HMS to its fullest extent.

From the first discovery meeting with customers, those elements are central in the implementation. If I had £5 for every person who has told me that in other housing management systems they have workflow parked at the bottom right of their screen doing nothing I would have about £45 by now. Workflow runs through ActiveH like "letters in a stick of rock" and bonds our solution with the organisation processes and business practices. It's not difficult to use, but can produce massive cost and efficiency savings and help implement best practice in an effortless manner. From something as simple as checking and avoiding booking a repair in Friday prayer time for a Muslim tenant to a full featured arrears management process, our workflow is indeed active, delivering efficiencies and service at every level. HC pressure, mergers, the credit crunch and interest rate hikes have put even more pressure on RSL's to leverage efficiencies by way of automation while always demonstrating improved customer service levels –workflow providing process automation enables both requirements. It allows our users to do more for less.

How do you work with other organisations, particularly for finance integration?

Our own finance offering is Microsoft Dynamics GP, but we are happy to interface to Open Accounts, Sun or whatever customers prefer. If customers request it we will consider any type of integration.

Many of the main suppliers now have taken one of two directions, either developing new modules in house or partnering with a dedicated supplier. Which camp are you in, use of best of breed or integrated products?

'Integrated products' is definitely the camp we're in, although we have always and continue to, take the view that integration alone should not be the single reason for choosing our solutions. We have always tried to make our applications as good as any best of breed. The big issues with choosing a diverse range of applications and plumbing them in to the main system are the time & effort needed to feed & water that extract/interface. Particularly when upgrades are applied and all that extra hassle for users. Having to be aware of three systems and how to use them is much harder than using three applications that look, behave & feel the same. We do have a number of successful partnerships, such as our close integration with Omfax. We are open in that we will consider any links that add value to our solutions for the customer.

How has increased merger activity in the RSL affected your customer base?

We have had some winners & losers, but overall just about up. ActiveH was always designed to easily take on new properties on merger in days or weeks rather than months or years. Backed up by our unique and caring customer service, believe me we do make that a reality. They say "let the buyer beware" don't they, but I would be very careful when choosing an HMS to check on previous mergers that have taken place & the timescales involved. On merger, keeping existing systems I think the latest 'killer ideas' for 'wrap around' asset & contact management systems is a red herring as a merger solution. The overall IT cost of all that integration & interfacing surely greatly outweighs the cost of actually selecting a single 'joined up' HMS and doing it properly from the start.

Tell me about your latest products, what's new for your customers to get excited about?

Our Housing Process Management (HPM) module is our latest addition to the ActiveH stable. It can deal with any housing process in a joined up fashion including ASB, complaints, demotion, Gas Service no access etc. It can be used to coherently plug the gaps in any HMS with all the benefits of full integration.



Tony Smith (ACIH) and Simon Reay

In terms of visibility you do appear to be changing your approach, is that deliberate?

We have added Hitex and several other exhibitions back in our Outlook calendars, yes. We have the most modern system in the marketplace here. Perhaps our 30 satisfied customers will need to share that secret a little in the future!

So you're back in the market for new sales?

Very much so.

Your customers vary from managing 1000 up to over 30,000 units, how do you address smaller organisations?

We believe that every customer deserves the best and all benefit from a single product and the same level of attention and care.

You had your user conference recently in November, how did that go and in what other ways do you interact with customers?

The annual conference was our best ever I would say. We take user groups and the conference very seriously indeed and rather than a mere sales opportunity we encourage customer involvement at all levels within these events. Our customers and their complete connection in everything we do is what makes the difference. We see customers as an essential part of our development process and wouldn't have it any other way. I would say every other month there are one or more meetings where customers lead in focus or design groups to progress developments in their joint interests. I have personal experience of suppliers hiding inadequacies by suggesting that the customer should change their business processes to suit their software. If you tried that with Shell Chemicals, you would be very quickly shown the door. Just because RSLs are partly or wholly in the public sector is no excuse for not respecting and valuing diverse customer cultures. An active forum also connects all levels of customers together and with MIS staff, right up to me as MD. I am sure you would agree that's pretty unique!

How do developments & enhancements occur, is there a fund for improvements?

Unlike many suppliers we don't keep a kitty and hold a raffle for a handful of improvements every year or so. ActiveH is being continuously improved with two major upgrades every year. Most customers are on a release no older than six months old. Any particular customer specific enhancements, once purchased are issued to all customers. Another benefit to our smaller customers.

Reporting and letter production is often a systems Achilles heel. How do users access these within ActiveH?

We have extremely flexible operational level report browsers in each module. Each of these can be fine tuned by user, department or site and used in conjunction with information entry screens just from a mouse click. We also have a full featured reporting solution available from every user's desktop. Over 170 standard reports, a mouse click away.

I understand you have implemented Crystal rather than SQL reporting services. I would have disagreed with that as a fundamental shift.

I understand your thoughts on the subject with your involvement in your own product, but when we made that decision, Crystal had far more offerings than the SQL2005 Reporting facilities. We will review that decision where appropriate, as we constantly do with all IT developments and trends but our users are very happy with the solution we have provided. The flexibility and control that it offers is unrivalled in my opinion, putting more control (and reduced costs) in their own hands.

Void report issues pop up a lot with most systems, how does ActiveH deal with that area?

ActiveH was always designed to deal with voids quite comprehensively. Voids are a separate part of the system and the use of pseudo tenancies (the Mr. Void syndrome) as seen in some systems, just suggests loss of touch with a very fundamental part of the housing process.

Your customers are spread right into the corners of the UK, from Stornoway to Belfast and the Isle of Wight. What issues does that pose?

That is the marketplace we are in, have customer, will travel!. We have made steps to reduce our carbon footprint where we can, use the train and video conferencing more and we have changed our company car policy to assist in changing behavior too. On-line help is the best we can produce to reduce reliance on us. Distance learning materials on video are being developed to further enhance that element.

Where do you see your self & ActiveH in the next 5 to 10 years?

I think we are in some interesting times. MIS, ActiveH and I are certainly here for the long term. It is clear to me that many other HMS suppliers will need to re-assess their own systems and platforms carefully in the next five years. I would guess that the pressure to do so will come from existing customers, struggling with the pace of change & legislation and in some cases experiencing increasing frustration. Some hefty re-writes and pain for some will no doubt need to be endured. With our all new, SQL Server; Windows based solution however, we are perfectly placed to handle whatever our customers, DCLG, HouseMark and whoever else chucks at us. I say bring it on Simon!

Who better to tell us about MIS than their users? Here's a selection of comments from some MIS customers

"Tony's comments about MIS-AMS, its products and customer satisfaction are very fair. The Company's commitment to delivering good service and quality solutions is very apparent. It is a highly motivated organisation with enthusiastic and dedicated staff that have user requirements constantly in focus."

Albert Barnes
Senior Partner
The JDI Partnership Limited

"I will always give credit to mis for taking the brave decision to totally revamp their product rather than paste cosmetic front ends on to emulate a GUI product

As a Consultant I have found them to be the most approachable of suppliers and certainly more open to ideas and criticism."

Linda Ferjani
LR consultants

" I believe the interview represents a fair and accurate assessment of the MIS product. As a stock transfer from Walsall Council in March 2003 we had to introduce a new housing system as we could not support the old mainframe system used at Walsall Council. MIS was chosen by a group of almost 70 users completing a full questionnaire and following a 1 hour presentation from 3 different suppliers. MIS functionality won the day for them quite convincingly.

We had a very tight timescale to migrate 27,000 properties with a mass of historical data. The conversion went well with no loss of data and a massive seed change in the way our new system worked. It took an extensive training plan and the odd tear or two but we have moved forward as a group and now benefit from a fully integrated system with one data base for properties and one data base for all contacts including tenants, tenant family groups, former tenants and everybody who has contacted us in one shape or another.

Remote working has gone really well and we look forward to the challenge of Housing Process Management in 2008.

I agree with Tony that current relationships are good and we see MIS as a partner rather than a supplier."

Jim Wearden
IS Manager
Walsall Housing Group

"Active H is an excellent user product – easy and simple to use – many features across modules I love.

The customer focus and listening are two of MIS's strengths brought in with the new management team - which are reflected in the product – for the front line user information is quickly available.

As a small customer in terms of stock, MIS have never undervalued us as a customer and our requirements – at the end of the day they appreciate we are still regulated under the same rules as organisations with 10,000 or 20,000 units so if we are asking for something from the product MIS have taken us seriously. We have good working relationships with all staff at MIS and the help desk really is a help desk which you can get straight through to a person and not a recording – a definite plus.

The structure of implementation is much better – for us the only thing not delivered in any implementation has been reporting – the upgraded product from a user point of view has been a very smooth transition process.

The main weakness of the system in the past has been reporting. However, MIS have responded to this challenge with a new BI Reporting module – this is available later this month and covers all modules – I can't wait to test it.

Integration from Great Plains seems to still be quite "lumpy" on the maintenance module – I would like to hear less from the finance team than I do. . Some improvements were shown at the recent user group and hopefully this will smooth it out. A dedicated finance and integration team now works on this and this has improved service

Lettings for Arches been the rawest module, but MIS have accepted some of the changes needed by many customers and allocated a lot of effort to improve it for the next major release in February. There is obvious commitment to enhance it as needed and to include Void Management within this module – a sure winner for the future. In the near future along side the HPM module for dealing with ASB MIS will have made a major achievement in the market place to produce an integrated system."

Sally Steade
Arches Housing

