

STAR

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NAVISION

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An in-depth Case Study

**MAXWELL
STAMP | PLC**

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Maxwell Stamp PLC quite rightly describes itself as one of the world's leading international economics consultancies having worked in over 165 countries and territories, from Albania to Zambia, since it was set up back in 1959.

Headquartered in London, the company also has a permanent office in Bangladesh and project offices around the world from where it serves a wide range of clients including national and regional governments, NGOs and public and private sector companies.

Applying sound economic principles to problem solving is at the heart of what Maxwell Stamp does but the scope of its work and the range of its clients have diversified far beyond the traditional fields in which economists operate. The company's expertise spans a wide range of competencies and policy areas—from international

trade to rural livelihoods, from privatisation to revenue administration, from health to financial sector analysis. Maxwell Stamp is a laudable example of an organisation that combines solid business acumen with a strong humanitarian ethos to make a real and positive difference to the economies and people of the geographies in which it operates. However complex and sophisticated its analysis, the company never forgets that its work in developing and least-developed countries is about eradicating poverty and increasing well-being.

"We always consider the bigger picture," says Stephen Cole, Financial Controller for Maxwell Stamp. "For example, trade policy can have a profound impact on the domestic economies in developing and transitional countries. It can influence overall growth rates as well as play a key role at the micro level, impacting on the livelihoods of specific

vulnerable groups. Trade policy can influence sustainable development directly through the creation of employment and earnings growth, and indirectly, such as where the revenue from tariffs forms a key component of government spending on primary healthcare, education and social safety nets.

"By working closely with client staff, the company ensures that its teams of consultants understand fully all the relevant issues, and that by involving them throughout the design and delivery of the solution, the results are sustainable in the future."

Considering the scale and scope of many of its projects Maxwell Stamp runs a fairly lean operation in terms of overheads. The London office has a headcount of 40 while 60 people are based in Bangladesh. These are supplemented by locally-deployed consultants and sub-contractors in

line with resources allocated to each project. There may be 100 to 300 people working on behalf of Maxwell Stamp at any one time. In Bangladesh, for example, there are 110 staff across two projects.

As with other consultancy operations, Maxwell Stamp derives its revenue primarily from provision of expertise, skills and time needed to ensure successful project delivery. Teams are established specifically for each project, bringing together a variety of disciplines and mix of staff levels. Time is recorded according to associated billing rates – the costs of which must be monitored and accounted for to help keep jobs within allocated budgets. This means tracking time and expenses and feeding figures into Maxwell Stamp’s Microsoft Navision based accounting system over project periods of six months to seven years, or more.

“Filling in timesheets is not the most popular task,” says Cole. “We had been using an emailed spreadsheet system which took care of the basics but fell short of the functionality and features that we needed. So we decided to install a new solution that would not only make it as quick and easy as possible for our people to complete

the process but would also automate transfer of data to Navision.

“Star Computers, which had been providing external IT and software support to the company for a number of years, proposed its own Smart Time & Expense entry module. Compared to the earlier system, it is a huge improvement. Much more user-friendly while the interface with our central system works without a glitch.”

The company piloted the new solution with its London-based staff, reasoning that gaining buy-in from the Maxwell Stamp practice area and senior managers would ease future roll-out to people overseas. Currently, there are 25 users who complete their time sheets online at the end of each week, usually whilst in the office but they can also gain online access over the Web through laptops or work offline and synchronise automatically when they reconnect.

Star’s system utilises Microsoft .Net Smart Client technology which provides for full local functionality as well as both the immediacy and flexibility of online access to corporate data and applications. This is particularly important for mobile consultants and remote offices.



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Stephen Cole, Financial Controller

Star’s Smart Time & Expense entry software gives a choice of views – either ‘calendar style’ grid format or line by line listing – and user-configurable screens, columns, re-sizing and terminology add to the ease of use.

All entries can be accompanied by an explanatory narrative, while simple ‘drag and drop’ functionality together with contextual right-click menus further add to the system’s user friendliness. There is even a Favourites List for fast access to each user’s ‘favourite’ clients and jobs – very useful considering that Maxwell Stamp may have as many as 7,000 live jobs at any one time.

“We now have greater visibility of the projects, and line managers can easily find relevant detail to review overall progress as well as by individual job. The system is clever enough to know the history of the projects, who is working on what job within which project. It also checks that individuals are authorised according to project and job. We can call up project reports showing variances, chargeable and non-chargeable time against budget, across projects,

by competencies and by practice area leaders. Line managers also have access to a live status report which shows where people are with time sheet submission – making it easy to remind those who are late. The entire system really is very flexible,” adds Cole.

UK

Star Computers Limited
Star Centre
Building 3 Hatters Lane
Croxley Green Business Park
Watford WD18 8YG
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0) 1923 246414
Fax: +44 (0) 1923 254301
Email: sales@starplc.com
Web: www.starplc.com

IRELAND

Star Computers Limited
Carmichael House
60 Lower Baggot Street
Dublin 2
Republic of Ireland
Tel: +353 (1) 661 3030
Fax: +353 (1) 246 7201
Email: sales@starplc.com
Web: www.starplc.com

USA

Star Americas
8770 W Bryn Mawr
Suite 1300
Chicago, Illinois 60631
USA
Tel: +1 (773) 867 8343
Fax: +1 (773) 867 2910
Email: sales@starplc.com
Web: www.starplc.com