

SLOWLY, SLOWLY, CATCHEE MONKEY

In all likelihood, 'they' would probably agree that thirteen years is a long time in pest management.

And, 'they' would probably be right ... as 'they' are about many if not most things.

But thirteen years and counting is how long it has taken one of Sydney's more progressive pest managers to investigate, analyse, select, deploy and start to develop an internet based business and data management system.

Shane Clarke, who owns and manages Pestforce out at Round Corner in Sydney's north west, took over the family business from his father, **Max**, in the early 1990s.

Today, Pestforce employs more than a dozen technicians and office staff and, as it has for more than 30 years, operates out of an aging timber framed fibro clad house in sprawling outer suburbia.

"The biggest threat to this business is and always has been the loss of our data base ... our goldmine ... from fire," Shane said.

Today, hard copy versions of Pestforce's customer files ... documenting every inspection, job and report since before 1980 ... continue to take up two rooms full of filing cabinets.

Before he finally decided on a new "relatively revolutionary" data and business management system in early 2010, Pestforce's digital database – a supplement to his paper files – was a DOS-based spreadsheet.

"The old system served us well for a long time. We knew if we got a call from a customer we'd last serviced 20 years ago, we'd be able to dig out what ever it was we found and what we did at the time, before we went back to see them," he said.

However, the paper and DOS-based system was becoming increasingly inefficient, fragile and risk-prone.

Since 2002, Shane had made a point of catching up with and talking to **Kevork Temisgian** and his Temisoft team at major pest management industry conferences around Australia.

"Kevork never pushed himself or his ServicePRO software at us. He simply kept us up to speed on what they were developing," he said.

According to Kevork, Shane worried about the cost-effectiveness of setting up an in-house server to drive a



Shane Clarke, in 2010, decided on a new "relatively revolutionary" data and business management system to replace Pestforce's inefficient and increasingly risk-prone DOS-based system.

computer based reporting, recording, scheduling, and business management system".

"It also worried him that if the building ever did go up in smoke, so would all his precious data," Kevork said. When he finally decided to bite the technology bullet, Shane figured he was setting himself and his business up to become a lot more operationally efficient and effective.

At the same time he was intent on:

- not burdening his balance sheet with costly and potentially redundant capital equipment;
- minimising capital equipment maintenance costs; and
- significantly boosting business security.

However, biting the bullet did not mean Shane wanted to change everything overnight.

"Shane Clarke might be progressive and far sighted, but he's also a careful planner who crafts each business move with methodical, systematic precision," Kevork said.

Pestforce's introduction, deployment, and implementation of ServicePRO-OnLine has been a process of trialling and challenging; fitting elements in here; bedding others down there; and only moving on to the next stage once everyone's happy.

Go the 'go tos'

For years, Shane's long standing 'go to' team members have been Office Manager, **Jill Shattles** and Senior Technician, **Phil Dwyer**.



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According to Shane, together, they made the old system function like clockwork and, together, they've driven the introduction of new, remote technology approach in keeping with Shane's slowly, slowly approach.

"In the past, we always printed out day sheets for the technicians to take out with them each morning," Jill Shattles said.

"Today, even though our guys are equipped with Motorola PDAs, to which we can send all the information they need at the stroke of a key, we still give them day sheets.

"We won't be doing this for ever. But, in the short term, the old routine is a bit of a security blanket," Jill said.

Until they went 'remote-on-line', Pestforce was governed by paper and procedures. Today, they still have the procedures in place but they are killing far fewer trees.

"The manual completion of paperwork was always seen as, simply, part of the job," Shane Clarke said.

"Reports, recommendations, job descriptions were all done by hand and returned to the office where we'd do a post-service entry into our old database system," he said.

Apart from dealing with mountains of paper and a lack of security, Shane said the 'old' system was also "oppressively inflexible".

"If a technician called in sick, we had to bring the other technicians back to the office and reschedule our bookings manually," Shane said.

"We'd have to go out to the sick guy's place to retrieve his paperwork, and reprocess it for whoever was taking over."

The 'old system' also meant neither Shane nor his managers could check their field technicians' hand written reports before they went to the clients.

They needed a system to:

- electronically issue jobs directly to technicians, along with site and client histories and descriptions; and
- enable technicians to electronically transfer completed reports and recommendations back to the office in real time.

Phil Dwyer said ServicePRO-OnLine is also making a big difference to team management.

"Now, when someone is sick, he can send all his jobs back into the system and we can reissue them to other technicians in real time, without having to get out all the paperwork, and without having to bring everyone back into the office.

"If someone finishes a job on the North Shore and suddenly we want to give them a job in Mt Colah, on the way back, they don't have to scribble down all the details on a piece of paper and look unprofessional.

"Instead, we simply send the job to his handheld and he can instantly have access to the clients details and complete the required service," Phil said.

"Another good example was yesterday, when I had to go out to a client out west of here instead of going down south to Menai to handle another scheduled job.

"The Menai job was passed on electronically to one of our other guys along with all the info that I had gathered so he went down there fully loaded up with all the ins and outs just by clicking the download."



Phil Dwyer – checking what's on the go before he takes off.

Downloading the old

Moving all the old data onto the new system was daunting, at least to begin with. But, not quite as daunting as getting hardened technicians to learn 'fancy new computer tricks'.

To begin the process of database transfer Jill and her team, with Temisoft's help, loaded the new software onto the office computers before transferring the old DOS-based database across.

"We spent a few months working through it all, making sure we had access to all the data we needed," she said. ▶

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◁ Once the ServicePRO-OnLine database was set up, Jill and Phil started to get the technicians using the handhelds to complete some of reports.

The first guinea pig in terms of device roll-out was Phil himself, who, until his hand was forced, had been sceptical of the new system.

"We figured that if Phil could learn to do it and embrace it, everybody else would 'roll over'," Shane said.

Gradually, step by step, the system is being added to and added to.

"For instance, we now have payroll time claims on the system. So, rather than having technicians complete manual day sheets, we have it all automatically recorded when each one starts and stops work.

"It saves the guys a lot of work, and there are no longer any arguments," Jill said.

There are also no arguments among the field force about the need for the new technology.

Shane said he knew Phil Dwyer had become a devotee when his was the first of the Motorola's to go in for service.

"As soon as it went in, we had Phil complaining bitterly that he didn't have his handheld and he suddenly realised how much paperwork he had been doing.

"And, we suddenly had him saying to us, "Look, we really should keep a spare handheld in the office for when a machine goes down."

"One thing about the ServicePRO software on the handhelds is that they 'remember' what's been written in each situation into their own little personalised 'library'," Jill said.

"This means, when it comes to compiling reports and



recommendations, as a technician is putting in comments, it will remember what he's said before in the same place in the report and 'offer' those responses which can then be selected from so they don't have to be all written out or typed in again.

"As time goes on, it gets quicker and quicker to complete reports."

Off site but not off line

Both Jill and Shane took a little while to accept the fact that their upgraded and updated database was no longer in-house.

"However, while we recognise it is only accessible while ever the internet is up and running, the risks of outages seem small and insignificant in comparison to the risks of having is all here," Shane said.

"And," added Jill, "it's a lot more relaxing than the way it was before, when, if I had not made sure we'd backed everything up on a Friday, I would go into panic mode."

Shane said Pestforce is progressively adding more and more documents to the system.

"For example, we don't do quotes on the system, because we want to be able to hand the client the quote directly. So our quotes, we are still doing manually," Shane said.

"And, some of our internal forms are still to be added to the system, like our quality assurance checklist that we do with all new jobs ... to ensure that everything we know should be done is done," he said.

"At present, these are just on paper. But those forms, as time allows, will be added to the system.

"Of course, like most good office systems, ours is in a state of constant change. Even when we were doing it manually, we were still changing and improving, new processes you had to complete, new forms you had to fill in.

"It is no different with an electronic system. As we move along, we keep seeing more that the system can do. And we realise things that need to be modified to suit our needs.

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Left: Kevork with Jill and Phil: part of the family.

Below: Jill Shattles and Phil Dwyer – it all takes time but teamwork is the key when it comes to integrating the old and the new.



"For instance we had an issue with the technicians accessing their 'job histories'. The way the system was originally set up, it only allowed them to access job numbers which had money 'attached'. The problem was that most of the calls we make out to jobs don't have money attached because we invoice most clients once and then complete the work over a period of time," Shane said.

"So we had to work with Temisoft to make adjustments to the system to allow technicians to access all their job histories. And, until that occurred, we still had to carry the manual cards out to each job," he said.

"We can't just say we are completely paperless, because it's the processes and information that's important.

"But, as time goes on, we are capturing more and more of that information electronically and getting rid of more and more of those documents."

Shane said, over time, ServicePRO-OnLine will handle more of Pestforce's office processes.

"For example, we were handling our debtors separately, printing statements off our database. And, we've been accounting for them by, in effect, double entering them into MYOB and then cross checking one with the other ... having the braces as well as the belt," he said.

"But, we are now saying we need to change that and track debtors using ServicePRO-OnLine, because we know it's been designed to integrate with other systems."

Kevork Temisgian said Pestforce still has a way to go before its business and operational management goes totally digital and remote.

"But, get there, they will, because they have all taken ownership of the system and all it involves.

"For us, working with Pestforce has been immensely rewarding. They have made us feel part of their family and, I have to say, they have become part of ours.

"And it's the way that all business partnerships should ideally work, if both parties are looking to achieve winning results." ■

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