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Good Practices in Social Security

Good practice in operation since: 2008

FS-Net, an IT system supporting the providers of the Family Start Program

A case of the Ministry of Social Development

Ministry of Social Development
New Zealand

Summary

The implementation of FS-Net to support the Family Start programme has successfully delivered an IT solution that meets the needs of both the 32 providers and the Ministry of Social Development. This project has used best practice, allowing for the development of an application that has met the needs of the people it is built for. The Usability practices followed in the project have ensured FS-Net is easy and fast to use.

To the providers it has:

- *assisted them to deliver the Family Start programme to their clients;*
- *reduced their compliance overheads (such as regular reporting);*
- *given confidence that their client data is secure and safe;*
- *freed up more time to deliver the Family Start programme allowing additional help for families with high needs.*

To the Ministry it has:

- *given access to accurate, targeted and timely reports;*
- *provided confidence that the programme is being delivered as required;*
- *reduced software support costs;*
- *cemented both Agile and Usability as key tools for future software developments;*
- *allowed for better insight to the deployment of the NZD 28.7 million available for the Family Start programme.*

In addition, the development process has built and strengthened relationships between the Ministry and the providers.

CRITERIA 1:

What was the issue/problem/challenge addressed by your good practice?

Background:

This submission for good practice is for the FS-Net application which has been developed to support the effective delivery of the Family Start programme. Family Start is a home-visit based programme run by 32 separate NGOs. Its clients are the most at risk mothers in New Zealand who are either pregnant or have children under 18 months old.

Funding for Family Start is provided by the Ministry to a value of NZD 28.7 million (2008/2009). Client Data is 100 per cent confidential. Providers have to report to the Ministry on their agreed outputs.

Issues:

The issues with the previous IT solutions were that:

- the system was unsecure and lacked robustness;
- it was complicated to use, taking more time than necessary to complete tasks;
- the data entered in the system was of a poor quality or missing entirely;

- different providers were using the system in different ways;
- reports to the Ministry were of a poor quality.

CRITERIA 2:

What were the main objectives and the expected outcomes?

Objectives:

- supply 32 providers with a safe and easy to use case management tool;
- capture high quality data;
- using the data entered by the providers, supply management reports to both providers and the Ministry.

Outcomes:

The expected outcomes would be that the providers had more time to spend working with people on the programme, and the Ministry could more effectively distribute programme funding using high quality management reports.

CRITERIA 3:

What is the innovative approach/strategy followed to achieve the objectives?

Traditional thinking would have been to give the providers a tool to supply management reports.

The FS-Net approach gave the providers a tool that is not only useful in their day-to-day business, but also automatically produces relevant management reports directly to the groups requiring them.

The development of the FS-Net application used a number of innovative approaches to deliver a successful application:

- A software development methodology called Agile was used on the project. The key features of this methodology are: rapid delivery of software features, collaboration between business people and IT people, changes are welcomed, working features are more important than project documentation, and that customer satisfaction is paramount.
- Strong Usability principles were incorporated into the project right from the start. Usability is about making it very easy for a person to use a tool to achieve a goal. By incorporating a number of usability tools and techniques into the software development project we ensured the solution was very easy to use.

CRITERIA 4:**Have the resources and inputs been used in an optimal way to implement the practice?**

Careful consideration was given to how the providers would best use FS-Net ensuring users of the system (both providers and the Ministry) were involved in defining their requirements. Best practice application development processes were used on the FS-Net project which included the Agile development methodology and usability techniques. Key elements of these include:

- the FS-Net screens were designed on paper and tested with actual users prior to being developed on the computer. This allowed many options and changes to be tested prior to spending money having them developed;
- through the development process users would review the system every two weeks and if it wasn't easy to use it was made better and reviewed two weeks later;
- business representatives and the IT team sat together and developed the system. Questions could be asked and answered straight away, removing the need for assumptions;
- as the development commenced the features of FS-Net were added and removed depending on what was most useful.

In addition, high quality training was provided to each provider at their site to ensure the system was well understood and would be used.

CRITERIA 5:**What impact/results have been achieved so far?**

- Providers are using FS-Net and finding it easy to use.
- The quality and entry of data has increased.
- The provider community and the Ministry have built trust and respect.
- Key programme milestones are tracked, and reminders given to providers ensure the clients receive the best from the Family Start programme.
- Outcome reports are accurate and provide the information needed with no manual intervention or effort.

CRITERIA 6:**What lessons have been learned?**

- Understanding the end users of FS-Net was critical to making the system best meet their needs.
- A collaborative effort between all groups ensured FS-Net was easy to use and did just what it needed to.
- Such a collaborative effort made implementation of the system successful as the users had "bought in" to the concept of the system and felt real ownership.

CRITERIA 7:**To what extent would your good practice be appropriate for replication by other social security institutions?**

The development method used and continuous involvement of the users was key to the success of FS-Net. A similar approach could be used in most software development projects that have a similar user base.

The concept of providing a useful tool to the providers that has a flow on effect of supplying quality reporting to the Ministry also provides real value.