

Implementing an engaging new PDR system at Northamptonshire Police



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Northamptonshire
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Northamptonshire Police sought to design a new PDR system with input from across the Force. A working group helped to ensure all points of view were accommodated and a roll-out programme combining communications, support and help from advocate videos made sure that PDR engagement was the strongest ever witnessed by the Force.

The challenge: Introducing a Performance Development Review (PDR) system that goes beyond expectations

Northamptonshire Police had no Force-wide PDR system in place. Frustrated by this, some managers had developed their own paper-based systems to make sure the PDR process went ahead. With no standard PDR in place it became difficult to engage people to see the value of PDR as an essential tool in managing people, and their performance and development.

Caroline Oppido, HR Manager, Northamptonshire Police, explains: *"We had no single system that was used across the Force. As our project to adopt and adapt a new system progressed, we realised just how many systems we did have, all used by different managers in different places."*

"We know performance management is vitally important to our Force and that our managers are trained and committed to it. However, without a simple-to-use system, it was hard for them to engage with the process and to see its value. It was impossible for us to collate and analyse reviews, and report on this information confidently."

The lack of a solid PDR system led to officers and staff becoming unclear as to the value of the PDR process - other than to demonstrate PDR compliance when looking for promotion.

Sara Postlethwaite, Leadership and Management Development Trainer, Northamptonshire Police comments: *"We had no clear and consistent message about why the PDR was valuable. If anyone needed an excuse not to complete it, the lack of an easy-to-use and standardised system gave them it!"*

The solution: Bringing together a working group to define what is needed

The team knew that scoping the new system would require input from beyond the HR and L&D teams. Caroline explains: *"From the outset, we recognised that a cross-functional working group was key. We wanted to have as much input as possible from as many areas as possible that would help to shape and decide on any new system we designed. We were very clear that decisions about how it would operate and run should not be made solely by HR. Information services, information security, corporate communications, operational officers at different levels, police staff, managers with a keen interest in PDR, project management, HR, professional standards – all were part of the working group."*

Sara continues: *"We had been gathering feedback continuously from our leadership programme participants about what people wanted from a PDR system – and we listened closely. We met and talked with people who had something to say about PDR and what was needed: managers; operational teams; police staff."*



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"At the core of the feedback, and our drive for the project, was the single recognition that PDR should be integrated into day-to-day work. It had to be really simple to use, intuitive and encourage engagement. We knew that if we had to write a long user guide for the system, we would have fallen short of our aim."

Selecting a system - choosing Talent Performance

With specific organisational features, language and processes, some Forces might assume that the best PDR systems are bespoke ones that are built in-house and integrated with other incumbent software. This was not the case for the Northamptonshire team.

They wanted a system already proven to be adaptable and flexible in similar settings that met the requirements of the working group and could be up and running quickly.

Caroline explains: *"Time was short, and our resources were limited. We knew it would be easier – and quicker – to simply configure a system that was already successfully being used elsewhere. It was also important that our PDR system stood apart from our other Force systems so that we had control over the probable adaptations and additions we would make in the future."*

Caroline and Sara had seen Talent Performance previously and thought that it had the functionality, flexibility and credibility that was needed. However, they wanted to make sure they had carried out proper due diligence. They spoke to colleagues in other Forces, reviewed the systems on the market and worked through the options. *"It was very clear that Talent Performance was the system for us."*

Working with Head Light to tailor the system – and involving the wider group too

Once selected, Head Light began to work closely – albeit remotely – with Caroline and Sara. Caroline and Sara configured each screen of their new PDR system based on the feedback they had gathered when consulting with the working group and system administration team. They considered the words used, the headings of tabs and boxes, and what each person would see on screen.

With this updated version, they took the working group and HR colleagues through the system, screen by screen. Caroline comments: *"Their feedback was really valuable and it also meant everybody could see the project coming to life and buy into this new simple to use software."*

The team also returned to those who had provided initial stage feedback, showed them the system, and checked if anything else needed to change. A further round of tweaks was made before a pilot study (which involved the entire IT department trying out the software and a small team within CID) began. *"It was a good way to test out the system and to seal engagement with the final version that we would eventually deploy across the Force."*

Any roll-out takes place in the context of the current organisational or business environment. For Northamptonshire Police, its introduction of the new PDR system coincided with the pandemic lockdown. *"With an organisation focused on operational priorities, we thought it would be best to introduce the system across the Force in a measured way. It meant we could deal with any outstanding issues as we went along."*



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Feedback from the users is always welcome. Some suggestions are adopted immediately, simply by the team amending the system themselves. Others are fed into the Head Light product development programme; if the amend can be made quickly, it happens within days. Longer-term developments are reviewed and rolled out at the next software update which occurs every few months. *"The speed at which Head Light resolves any issues that we have had has been immensely helpful to us. We have real confidence in them being able to get things done."*

The role of advocate

The cross functional working group helped to create a pool of advocates. One officer videoed himself getting started with the system and finding his way around – and then shared it with colleagues. Caroline explains: *"It's an amateur video showing someone navigating around the screens. It shows how easy the system is to use and how users can work it out for themselves. Throughout the video, he makes comments as to how good the system looks. The video itself is unpolished and is yet somehow more credible for that. It has had a big impact on getting PDR talked about and on to people's radars – and we could never have predicted that."*

Support and communications: essential components to the project

The team knew that more formal communications would also play a key role during the initial project stages and the later roll-out. *"Having a comms professional within the working group was important for us. It meant we were able to get the message right as we released the system across the Force, focussing on the positive, on bedding down the system and laying the foundation for the next phase. The comms programme was a key part of our success."*

The team has invested time in supporting its users. Initial training took place remotely. Sara hosted several drop-in webinar sessions to get users viewing the system. She also recorded video clips of specific common tasks that she made readily available by uploading them to the Intranet. *"We decided early on to offer support as required and created simple user guides. The system needs little explanation but, for specific queries, we will host a webinar and support users through a dedicated email inbox. We issue regular updates which are featured in daily Force Orders reminding people of what to do and when to do it – this helps to keep the PDR message front of mind. It means we are doing what we can to get the system integrated into their work and them engaged with the process."*

A PDR system that people talk about

One of the most validating discoveries has been the extent of the positive feedback. Sara explains: *"People taking the time to tell us how good the PDR system is unheard of – and yet that is what is happening. We get positive messages sent to us and we have been told that this is the best PDR system we've had had in the Force for 15 years. When our Chief Constable reacted to our Twitter post showcasing the very positive feedback, other Forces took note of what we were doing."*

The outcomes to date

Within three months of the initial roll-out and PDR engagement has reached record levels. At the end of the first two months, 57% of people had at least one performance objective – and this increased to 77% by the end of month three. Sara comments: *"These engagement results far exceeded expectations. We had better engagement results in three months than we had ever had across an entire 12 month period. We always thought that if we focussed on high levels of engagement, we would need to be spend a lot less time on compliance!"*



“It seems that people were not as disengaged from the PDR process as we had thought. They just needed a really good system in place – and now they have it.”

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Talent Performance provides a range of analytics and reporting functionality as standard which enables Caroline and the team to access real-time stats. It also allows them to look at how specific operational areas are doing – and to compare them. *“Our Culture and People Board has been impressed with the level of detail we can report on and the ability to dig deeper when needed. They also welcomed the very positive anecdotal feedback each member was hearing from their own teams about the ease of use and simplicity of the system. It has also been useful to show leaders the take up and use of the PDR system in their areas – and those of their peers; it adds a little friendly competition and focus!”*

Next steps

Users are already exploring the system. They want to include more of the available functionality in their check-ins. *“We started by asking people to add at least one performance objective. Then, we asked them to also include a values-based objective. Now, users are wanting to include links to their own development objectives and plans. We know that the demand to use the system more will grow.”*

The Promotion Process will access the PDR information going forward and Caroline expects that, after the first 12 months, they will be able to quantify the time and resource savings from no longer having to chase PDRs for action and completion.

By choosing a highly configurable, already-used-elsewhere system, the team saved time and resource, but it also gave them the confidence that they would roll-out a fully functioning and customised system across the Force on time.

Caroline concludes: *“We wish to evidence good leadership and build a positive culture within the Force. We now have the PDR system that can record, track and measure this. It seems that, in the past, people were not as disengaged from the PDR process as we had thought. They just needed a really good system in place – and now they have it.”*

Lessons learnt from this project

Caroline and Sara summarise the key takeaways from this project that they would share with other Forces looking to update their PDR system.

- Be clear on what you want to achieve as your end goal – and stick to it.
- Build a cross-functional working group.
- Take time to gather input from across the Force, sharing the vision.
- Build advocates and put them to work for you.
- Focus on the essentials for the initial implementation – and look to add additional functionality at a later stage.
- Plan a phased roll-out.
- Understand the value of, and invest in, a strong communications programme.
- Use the analytics not just for reporting but for spotting when further support is needed to get people up and running with using the system.
- Accept that the project will never be finished – communications, support and tweaks will always be present.

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