practiceplan
supporting the business of dentistry

Overview

Business challenge

As a result of sweeping changes to the structure of the NHS, Practice Plan, the UK's leading provider of custom-branded dental plans, saw its business nearly double in size within a very short period. Its existing transactions processing system required further development to ensure flexibility and scalability to deal with the additional workload, and with a large number of peripheral systems also managing important business data it was critical to have a system that provided a clear overview of operations.

Solution

Polymorph, an IBM Business Partner, helped Practice Plan develop a new IBM® Lotus Notes® and Domino® based application that unites the collections and payments system and peripheral applications into a single central solution, and provides significantly improved performance for payment processing. A new extranet also allows dentists to access patient information directly from the system.

Practice Plan keeps dentists and patients smiling

Planning for the future with an IBM Lotus Notes and Domino solution from Polymorph

Practice Plan is the UK's leading provider of custom-branded dental plans. Whether a practice is looking to convert from the NHS or introduce a new dental membership plan, Practice Plan can offer the support and guidance needed to succeed. With a range of industry-leading support services, Practice Plan helps dental practices promote their own brands and develop their businesses.

Practice Plan has dedicated regional support managers and an in-house marketing and design team that works with practices to produce personalised marketing collateral. The company also produces The Business of Dentistry, a magazine packed full of information and inspiration, and offers an array of events, from annual workshops to events covering important topical issues. Practice Plan continually evolves its services to ensure practices have all the right tools to help them grow and prosper.

Unlike many of its competitors, Practice Plan does not market directly to patients; instead, it works with dental practices, helping them to develop and improve their own brands. In addition to providing Direct Debit collections and payment processing services, Practice Plan also provides a wide range of marketing, design and business support functions, a key differentiator from its competitors. The company has grown rapidly and now supports approximately 1,000 dental practices and approximately 600,000 patients.

"The story of our company is one of explosive growth," says John Cawrey, I.T. Director at Practice Plan. "This started in 2006, when a major change in the funding structure for dentistry under the National Health Service led to a wave of dentists taking the opportunity to move into private practice. This created an enormous demand for payment plan management services, and as a result, our business went from handling around 250,000 patients' accounts to handling more than 450,000, almost overnight. Since then, we have continued to grow to around 600,000, and we're expecting further expansion given the government's intentions in the near future."

Business Benefits

- Accelerates monthly batch processing, allowing the process to be done as late as possible in the cycle, minimising collection issues and refunds.

- Provides comprehensive management of all business processes, while remaining flexible enough to adapt to the unique requirements of approximately 1,000 different dental practices.

- Enables users to manage all day-to-day workload via a single, user-friendly Lotus Notes environment.

- Enhances knowledge sharing and process efficiency, enabling the company to handle further significant business growth.

Meeting the needs of business growth

For several years, Practice Plan had been using a custom-built application to handle the collections process. Although this system was well-designed and popular within the business, it did not scale well as the transaction workload increased. The full monthly processing run had to be scheduled over a weekend, perhaps a week or more before the optimum processing date.

"Since the batch process took such a long time, it began dictating the way we did business," explains John Cawrey. "It forced us to assemble the transactions file earlier than we really wanted to. For several reasons, it's much more efficient to leave the collections process until as late in the cycle as possible.

"For example, if a patient decides to leave their plan in the period between the completion of the collections process and the actual transaction date, we will already have requested the money via the Direct Debit system for the next month – which means we need to issue a refund. So the later we can do the processing cycle, the fewer corrections we need to make."

Identifying an opportunity

Practice Plan began thinking about how to remedy this issue, and decided to build a new payments system that could offer better performance. During the requirements-gathering process, the company realised that this offered an opportunity for a much more radical redesign of its entire IT architecture.

"We had been using IBM Lotus Notes and Domino as our corporate email and calendaring solution, and we had also developed a number of small Domino-based applications to manage our other business processes: for example, applications for managing sales leads, sending mailings to patients, tracking marketing campaigns, and so on," says John Cawrey. "Each application was designed and developed to meet a specific and time-critical need, but there wasn't much integration between them. We found that this created a lot of duplication of data and effort, as well as inconsistent data. We realised that if we could consolidate all of these applications into a single system, we would have a much more efficient way of driving all our business processes."

Finding the right partner

The company issued a request for information to a number of selected vendors, including IBM, Microsoft, and several smaller companies that offered off-the-shelf solutions or had experience in high-volume payment projects. IBM recommended its Business Partner, Polymorph, and the Practice Plan team was impressed with the proposal that Polymorph delivered.

Solution Components

Software
- IBM® Lotus Notes® and Domino®

IBM Business Partner
- Polymorph

"The solution is popular with our clients, popular with our own users, and has already made a dramatic difference to the efficiency of our business processes."

— John Cawrey, I.T. Director at Practice Plan

"We liked the fact that Polymorph suggested using Lotus Notes and Domino as the platform for the new solution, because it is a solution that all our employees are familiar with, and our IT team has a lot of experience with it," comments John Cawrey. "We had initially assumed that a high-volume payments system would require a traditional enterprise database platform such as DB2 or Oracle, but Polymorph provided some proofs-of-concept that demonstrated that Lotus Domino was more than capable of processing the required number of transactions in the time we specified. We also spoke to several of Polymorph's other clients, and were impressed with the systems they had developed and the strong working relationships they had built."

Faster processing, more flexibility

The new system has now been live for more than 12 months. It is capable of processing the monthly collections process for over 600,000 patients within 70 minutes, and running the entire process from end to end takes just five hours.

"Because of the architecture, we now have a linear scale of processing," explains John Cawrey. "Processing 10,000 patients takes around one minute, so growing to over a million, even two million patients would not strain the system or compromise our business processes.

"The acceleration in processing gives us much more flexibility, so we can now run the process just a few days before the transaction date. This means fewer corrections and fewer refunds, which makes the whole process much more efficient and accurate."

Streamlining business processes

John Cawrey adds: "Equally important is the fact that we have been able to retire all of our small peripheral applications, and can manage every key business process and all important business data within a single system. People now know where to look to find the information they need, and there is no longer any doubt about whether the data is consistent. Everything is much slicker, which really helps people work more productively."

Enhancing customer service

Following the initial implementation, Polymorph helped Practice Plan develop a new extranet for dentists, which allows them to access patient information in near real time, and check details such as names, addresses, and payment status. If a patient's name or address changes, they can submit the new information using the extranet – a process which previously required them to fill out a paper form and post it to Practice Plan.

"The solution is popular with our clients, popular with our own users, and has already made a dramatic difference to the efficiency of our business processes," concludes John Cawrey. "As our business continues to grow, we are confident that the solution from Polymorph and IBM will grow with us, and adapt to the changing needs of the dental business throughout the UK."

For more information

To learn more about IBM Lotus software, contact your IBM sales representative or visit: **ibm.com/lotus**

To learn more about products, services and solutions from Polymorph, visit: **polymorph.co.uk**

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