Timetabling at the University of Sheffield, UK – hardening the incremental approach to timetable development

Simon Geller, Asistant Registrar, University of Sheffield

285 Glossop Rd, Sheffield S10 2HB
s.geller@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract. As well as an incremental approach, a "killer application" is needed to persuade timetablers to make the switch to using timetabling software, as well as an element of compulsion. In our case, obliging users to make their bulk room bookings via the software was the crucial factor

In my presentation at PATAT 02 I outlined the position on automating the University of Sheffield's timetable at that time. Departments had a great deal of autonomy in creating their own timetables, and as a result timetabling had become something of a "black art", with individuals developing different methods of timetabling depending on their professional backgrounds.

First steps had been made to introduce timetabling software into departments. Following a pilot scheme to determine whether departmental timetablers would find the Facility software useful, it was found if they were to start using it effectively a substantial amount of training and support, combined with a high-level directive that the software must be used for timetabling, would be needed.

Our concerns were that space was not being used efficiently, and that there was poor communication both inter-departmentally and between departments and the centre.

Further developments

As a result of the project we undertook the following actions.

a) A formal review was undertaken by Facilities Management of the use of departmental rooms.

b) Management Information was enhanced

c) Adopt an incremental approach to timetable development. Start with the largest departments, work closely with departmental timetablers to create a full departmental timetable. Ensure continued maintenance of the data. Monitor outcomes.

Results

Our review showed that we needed to harden our incremental approach. Simply offering the software to departments was not working. We needed a "killer app" to persuade them to come on board. The key was to integrate the timetable with centralised Room Bookings – departmental timetablers would enter their timetable directly, and room bookings could go straight in and allocate rooms to it. This would be a major improvement over our current method of despatching forms by email.

A more rigorous approach to space auditing persuaded senior management that there was a problem with approximately 26% of available space being used at the busiest time of the year (Using the space utilisation formula, usage x occupancy divided by 100.

With the resources to do this in place, letters went out to Heads of Departments outlining what we were going to do. Use of the software has subsequently increased from a small group of "core users" to a wide spread of users across the institution.

Our conclusion therefore is that as well as an incremental approach, a “killer application” is needed to persuade timetablers to make the switch to using the software, as well as an element of compulsion. In our case, obliging users to make their bulk room bookings via the software was the crucial factor.