

P Tech landscape: Into the flow

Words: Simon Wicks



#Plantech has tended to focus on intelligent data gathering and sorting, but what about the fundamental processes that drive planning? Simon Wicks finds out about Motif, workflow software for planners, and planners alone.



"This is for planners and planners alone." **Tom Woolner** is adamant. "They've never had that kind of software. This is how we work, not how another industry works."

It's true – the workplace software revolution has barely touched planning. In recent months, however, Tech Landscape has profiled platforms that help planners access data or conduct well-managed consultations.

But there are gaps unfilled in the journey from site identification to discharge of conditions – even though the planning application process ought to be easy to regulate within a workflow application.

"Planning is almost crying out for it," observes Woolner, who has drawn on his own experience of planning consultancy with Quod as co-founder

of Motif, the project management application for planners (and planners alone).

"I spent a lot of time looking for documents, and the right iteration. There are these highly time-consuming, low-value admin tasks every day."

Business partner **Chris Hunter** chips in. "From a business perspective you want to make sure you're driving revenue and giving the best experience to your clients. You want visibility and transparency across teams. You want things that help you become more efficient at your job."

The two riff off one another easily – their friendship goes back to student days at **Royal Holloway, University of London**. Woolner: "A lot of processes tend to be inherited from one generation and one company to another. We've ended up in 2019 as an industry looking for better solutions."

Hunter: "There's been a rule that if it ain't broke don't fix it."

But people are starting to realise that just because it's been like this it doesn't have to continue." Woolner: "If you look at the number of people under 35 in planning, it's a young industry. There's a drive to get more young people into the industry. But then you walk into an office and it's got these dated practices..."

Hunter: "Papyrus did a job. Fax machines did a job. What's next?"



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It was just such a conversation that led to the founding of Motif. Woolner, now self-employed, was working from the office in which Hunter runs his tech sector recruitment and advisory business. Hunter's speciality is helping tech start-ups operate more efficiently. The two men would speculate on how planning could be similarly improved.

Another university friend, Luke Moody, is a software developer ("He puts his hands to anything and seems to achieve it," says Woolner). It seemed obvious what they had to do.

"We wanted a practical application that could be implemented in a short time that wasn't going to take people too far from where they are now," recalls Hunter. "What's the current workflow? How can we create something that facilitates it without disruption?"

Clarity

Motif, aimed at planning consultancies, breaks the planning application process into four stages:

1. Set-up / conflict checks

Including job mapping and key information about the job.

2. Pre-submission status

Including sharing key data with colleagues creating a project team.

3. Live planning application

Including planning application details and a consultation response tracker.

4. Post submission solutions

Including decision notice storage, discharge of conditions tracker.

What the duo had found when speaking to potential customers was that few organisations approach the process in quite the same way, despite the application process always having the same goal.

What's more, they often found that teams *within* organisations differed in approach, with obvious inefficiencies. Could technology improve this?

Motif's dashboard enables planners to see at a glance the progress of all of their live projects, with real-time updates. This alone is a step forward, stresses Woolner.

"I've found that you're juggling a dozen applications at one time," he says. "Trying to keep on top of them all can be very hard because they can change so fast. We asked people how to you keep track and they tapped their heads and said 'We just remember it'."

Motif puts everything in one place, accessible to all team members and even all employees of a consultancy. "In general the idea is to create transparency and to provide an overall view of that consultancy's progress," says Hunter.

Removing obstacles

The team has addressed common sticking points. For example, everyone has to set up a job, but it can be laborious and everyone does it differently. "We wanted to standardise the creation of a job across the industry," explains Hunter. "Everyone has the same requirements – for example, the client, the site address. We've tried to keep it uncomplicated." It can take, he asserts, as little as two minutes to create a new job on Motif.

Where an element of standardisation already exists – job types on the Planning Portal, for instance – they've stuck with it. The idea, they stress, is not to push planners into wholesale change, but to give them something that mirrors their current experience, improves upon it and is easy to pick up.

Transparency runs deep. On setting up a job, team members are automatically alerted and assigned responsibilities. Motif will also flag up 'conflicts' with other work within the consultancy.

"We've already got a roadmap filled with things we think we can add and improve"

"It will automatically alert a colleague who is working on a job that may conflict – for example, within a particular radius or local authority area, or if there's a potential conflict of interest within the company," says Woolner. The "pièce de résistance", however, is the document tracker. When firms rely on Dropbox and email to store and share documents, it's too easy for versions to get mixed up or mislaid.

"You might be looking at, say, 15 documents that are going to be attached to a planning application. You can upload them and the system will list all documents, all conflicts and show what's finalised and what's a draft. Every document is the latest version, and we have a traffic light system that helps with version control."

There's plenty of detail – and more to come. "We've already got a roadmap filled with things we think we can add and improve," says Hunter. "We have a process plan for how we're going to take this to market the right way."

The justification for the application is clear. As Woolner says: "We read that 40 per cent of all applications are invalid immediately. That costs half a billion pounds a year." Anything that can save some of this unnecessary expense is surely a good thing. Find out more: www.motifpm.com

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