

A new way of working

Specialist electricals business Dixons Retail has been able to transform the way its employees work together, thanks to Microsoft partner OSC. Amber Stokes finds out more

Dixons Retail is one of Europe's largest specialist electrical retailing and services companies. Its brands include Currys and PC World in the UK and Ireland, as well as many others across Europe. Employing approximately 30,000 people in ten countries, the organisation welcomes more than 100 million customers every year online and in over 900 Dixons Group stores.

Headquartered in Hemel Hempstead in the UK, Dixons' geographical scope is far reaching, spanning not just Europe where its stores are based, but also Hong Kong where its sourcing office is located. The organisation's aim is to 'bring the latest technology at the best prices to customers combined with great advice and after sales care,' and so in order to continue to deliver on this vision, the company looked at how it could improve its internal collaboration.

"We decided to modernise the back-end processes of the business to allow us to work more efficiently, which will ultimately enable us to provide better services to our customers in stores," explains Steve Foster, business technology manager for corporate and Knowhow solutions at Dixons Retail. "Our first challenge was to consider how

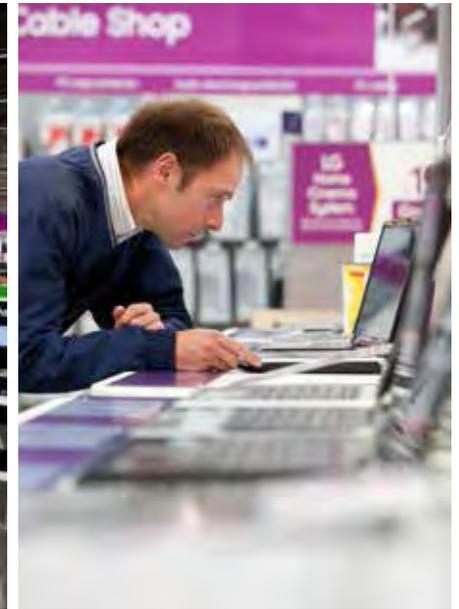
we could move everyone onto one single e-mail platform across the geographies and departments, to help us communicate and collaborate more efficiently. An obvious next step was other ways we collaborated, including how we used our intranet."

Foster and his team wanted to move to Microsoft Office 365 and Microsoft worked closely with the organisation to plan the next steps. Late in 2013 Microsoft introduced Foster to OSC, a cloud and productivity solutions provider that specialises in the development of innovative intranets using Office 365 and SharePoint. "Dixons has a very clear vision of what they want to do and recognises that improving internal processes is a means to that end," says Chris Barnard, director of business development, Worldwide Retail, at Microsoft. "OSC offers a modern, agile solution for retailers looking to transform how they collaborate with store and headquarter employees. And it's always great to see companies investing in their employees!"

"I spent some time with OSC consultants and was impressed with their ability to demonstrate how their solutions meet the challenges of retailers," says Foster. "The solution looked simple, modern and intuitive – just what we were looking for."

In February 2014, OSC began a 'discovery phase' at Dixons, which allowed employees to review what they liked and what they didn't like about their current intranet and what they would like to see in a new one. Ali Sanaei, principal consultant at OSC, helped to run approximately 20 workshops with Dixons' employees from different departments and teams to find out more about how they worked and what they wanted in a new system. "We looked at the technology that Dixons had in place at that time, but the discovery phase also allowed us to learn about the organisation's branding and guidelines to ensure that we could develop a solution that was the perfect fit," he reflects. "It was also important to us that we learnt about Dixons' culture and an essential part of the encouraged blue-sky thinking from Dixons' employees to really find out what they wanted in the future."

But the discovery phase was equally beneficial for Dixons. "It meant we were able to find out how each division functioned and it also meant that people outside of the IT department had the opportunity to influence what our new system would be like," says Foster.



OSC has modernised Dixons' back-end systems, which will allow employees to work more efficiently and enable them to provide better services to customers in stores

Cover story

Dixons Retail

Once OSC had captured all of that information, its consultants were in a good position to know how they could help Dixons transform its internal communication and collaboration, and Foster requested

them to implement mini-projects that would really test if OSC was up to the challenge.

The four projects are: a customer plan site; a finance team site; a people directory; and a refreshed Office 365 landing page.

Customer plan site

This acts as an information site for the customer plan project team within Dixons. It gives everyone access to key information such as contacts, news and feedback. "This was the first project to go live and we've already had positive feedback from users," says Foster.

Finance team site

Similarly, OSC built a site for Dixons' internal finance team, allowing members of that department to have access to information quickly. "This is undoubtedly something we will roll out across other departments to enable people to work better together," says Foster. "The site is now ready to use and we're currently building up the content to put on it."

People directory

Dixons' employees were previously relying on Lotus Notes to search for internal contacts, and so OSC has developed a directory that enables thousands of Dixons' employees to search easier and much faster. "This is due to go live very shortly, which we're looking forward to – it's going to be a real help to us and change the way we work," says Foster.

Refreshed landing page

Dixons was using the temporary landing page in Office 365 for its intranet. Foster and his team had made developments but they wanted changes to be made to make it easier to use without confusing users ahead of the possible implementation of a new intranet. OSC has refreshed the landing page and made it easier to use with a modern UI.

OSC is also currently working with Dixons to develop a number of new forms to help streamline what is currently an outdated workflow application based on Lotus Notes. "We're looking forward to revamping this and moving it to SharePoint, which will transform a process that impacts most people at Dixons," adds Foster.

The priority for Dixons is to modernise its processes and to enable employees to work better and collaborate more easily. This has meant migrating from Lotus Notes in many cases and making the sites more user friendly. "All of our projects use a modern UI design,



Solution profile

Improving user adoption

OSC CEO Karl Redenbach explains how LiveTiles is a key tool for retailers in need of improving collaboration among employees



We've been working in the collaboration space for 13 years now and in that time we've worked with hundreds of retailers worldwide. Typically we would develop a bespoke custom solution each time, which could cost a lot. And so, over the last 18 months, we have invested US\$12.7 million in R&D to reuse this IP and create an out-of-the-box solution for organisations.

Our specialists from OSC offices across the globe have worked together on this to combine our knowledge of the industry and our customers so that we can offer a world-class tool that can be used by any retailer. We call it LiveTiles and its success has been overwhelming since its launch. Because of this, as of July this year, we launched LiveTiles as its own company with myself as its CEO. I'm looking forward to working with 27 partners that will help us scale our product and really take it to market.

LiveTiles is a user interface tool that sits on top of Office 365, Microsoft Azure

and Windows 8. We're a big believer in user adoption – it's everything in software development. And so we have focused on three things with LiveTiles: it has a modern user interface, which makes it easy to use, and it's also easy to make changes – we give even a non-technical user the power to build their own experience for their department.

Historically, retailers have struggled with paper-intensive processes, which has slowed them down and prevented good collaboration. But LiveTiles allows employees to share information that previously wasn't possible, by combining other tools such as social media and Yammer. And because it is an out-of-the-box solution, retailers can constantly evolve the solution and make changes as necessary – we've made it easy for retailers to keep up with demand and ensure that they can constantly improve the collaboration between their employees.

“I was impressed with OSC’s ability to demonstrate how its solutions meet the challenges of retailers”

Steve Foster

Dixons Retail

offering a great user experience for Dixons’ employees,” says Sanaei.

LiveTiles, the user interface tool that sits on top of Office 365, has been a key element to the projects’ success. It helped OSC make changes when the project was in its final testing phase – modifications are commonplace after any implementation – and the use of LiveTiles meant that those changes were made quickly. “If I had a request e-mailed to me, I was able to make that change straight away and reply within minutes confirming its completion, says Sanaei. “It made implementing the UI a lot easier and faster and also meant we’re able to roll out a consistent UI across the different sites. But it also means users themselves are able to make some changes.”

And because the projects use Office 365 and SharePoint online, OSC has even been able to collaborate more easily itself, spanning offices that are located in four different continents, allowing them to make the changes that Dixons has needed when they are needed. Similarly, OSC also used Microsoft Lync to regularly keep in touch with Dixons’ stakeholders. Where previously consultants would have to request a meeting or rely on calls to discuss matters on the project, Lync has enabled the organisations to seamlessly work together faster and more efficiently, no matter where they are located.



Dixons has transformed its internal communication and collaboration

So, has OSC passed the test? “I was really impressed with the discovery phase, but I wanted to see what they were capable of. And the implementations have been a real success,” says Foster. “I’ve also received positive feedback from each of the business teams that have worked with OSC on these projects. They’re finding the sites really easy to use. While users won’t need much training to get up and running on the new sites, the next step is to build up all the content correctly.”

Since the success of these projects, Dixons is now discussing the replacement of its core intranet. “We hope that OSC will guide us over the next 12 months to help us become self-sufficient, and then remain a partner for when we need their help and advice in the future,” he says. “Once we feel like we have our back-end systems working the way we want them, then we will be able to look at how we can improve store collaboration too.”

“Change in customer behaviour forces a change in many retailers’ business models. Today’s empowered and connected consumers are creating a sense of urgency for retailers to modernise the store experience, deliver seamless experiences, and engage and delight with outstanding customer service that uses the best of online data richness with the best of human interaction,” says Tracy Issel, general manager, Worldwide Retail, at Microsoft. “It’s

exciting to see Dixons enjoy the benefits of OSC’s repeatable approach to quickly realise the benefits for their employees. The ability to engage directly with store employees and directly influence the consumer shopping experience can be transformational.”

Foster expects the technology to really help with future potential expansions of the business, while also helping with his vision of a change in culture. “We’re moving away from a world that revolves around having meetings and using pens and paper, to one that’s based on a modern collaboration platform that means it doesn’t matter where you’re based in the world – you can still work on the same document. It’s a very exciting time for us and there’s a real opportunity to create a new way of working.”

Dixons’ top five highlights

1. OSC is a partner that understands retail
2. Consultants provided key business engagement early in the process
3. Offered short trials without requiring a long-term commitment
4. Provided IT and business support
5. Great stakeholder management.