

The move to flexible e-assessment

This case study is based on a presentation made by Ruth Lilley, Head of Professional Development of the National Federation of Property Professionals, London in October 2010.

In 2007 NFoPP were faced with a challenge, common to many awarding bodies and certifying organisations. A very large amount of their resources were focused purely on the logistics of organising and marking their quarterly exams. The introduction of a new qualification only threatened to compound this challenge. Working with Lamark, NFoPP successfully transitioned to flexible e-assessment within a couple of weeks and focused their resources on training and the quality of their examination program.

The NFoPP Awarding Body provides qualifications in Residential Estate Agency, Letting and Property Management, Commercial Agency and Auctioneering. A Level 3 Technical Award qualification was introduced in 2003 to encourage minimum standards of competence for all those working in agencies. The decision was made to go with a paper-based exam, based on MCQs and run every three months.

The take up was greater than expected and the introduction of a new exam in 2007 forced NFoPP to take action as:

- The timing of exams, including resits, quickly became problematic,
- The length of time taken to organise and invigilate these tests became more than problematic,
- Marking these papers became a nightmare of epic proportions.

The benefits to NFoPP quickly became obvious. There were immediate savings in staff time, venue costs, the sheer logistics of moving paper about. The scope for human error was reduced to an absolute minimum, and the detailed statistics and information that were available led to better questions and better candidate support. The basic simplification of the process reduced the scope for mistakes and problems, and thus reduced the stress on the NFoPPs staff, allowing their training and education staff to focus on training and education, rather than the continuous grind of the testing cycle.

Security problems were much reduced as well – with the paper system, it was never possible to assert 100% physical control over the actual physical papers containing the NFoPP's precious intellectual property. It also quickly became clear that the test centre network and the nature of flexible e-assessment made candidate misbehaviour much harder to do, and much easier to spot.

The advantages to the candidates quickly became clear as well even though with the introduction of e-assessment the exam fees were doubled! Booking and scheduling was much quicker and easier, registration deadlines were less fraught, resits could be arranged quickly. There were reduced costs to candidates with lower travel costs and less time off needed for the actual exam itself. The total award consists of a set of four separately tested modules, and flexible assessment allowed the candidates more flexibility in when and how they took those

four tests – which leads to many of them completing the test cycle much quicker. Add in the speedy results and the less intimidating feel of an invigilated test centres compared with an exam hall filled with a hundred other candidates, and exam stress was greatly reduced. NFOPP feels that this reduction of exam stress was the most important benefit of e-assessment from the candidate's perspective.

NFOPP found that there were many fewer no-shows with the new system, and the feedback was that many of their younger members, especially female members, found the new system a huge improvement over the old exam hall system.

While employers were generally supportive, the initial feedback from some of the very largest employers was that they wanted more visibility of their candidates progress and bookings. This was overcome by granting them access codes, so they could train and then schedule their candidates under their control.

The other challenge is that making a small change in an assessment can sometimes take a few days to realise within the organization – a huge improvement on paper systems though. In most cases there is plenty of notice of change, but in the occasional situation where an immediate change is needed the organization has to get to full speed as the e-assessment system allows next day changes.

NFOPP has some key suggestions for those planning the same transition themselves.

The transition from manual pen and paper exams to flexible e-assessment is not only a technical or an educational change, but also a technical and commercial one.

The first point is to make sure all your stakeholders are on board, and are given the opportunity to have input into the process of transition.

Make sure the bank of questions is robust and well tested. If revising your syllabus or the type of questions you use forms part of this transition, allow time for question testing and analysis.

The technology lead needs to be provided by an IT department that considers both business needs and technology needs. Appoint a dedicated project leader to lead this project through, gather the necessary resources, and keep to timescale and budget.

Include at least one IT-savvy person within your Awarding Body team, who understands the implications and is not frightened by the technology.

Overall, while the transition from manual testing to flexible e-assessment was not without challenge, the outcome has been completely positive. Assessment is now a positive and flexible part of the NFOPP's training systems, strongly supported by industry stakeholders including candidates and employers.

Further details of Lamark can be found at <http://www.lamark.com/> and their Head of Sales, Patrick McMurray can be contacted at pmcmurray@lamark.com or on 07876 682 310

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