Avoid FOI fines and faux pas:

Enquiry software can help you monitor FOI and other information enquiries

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Perplexing complexity

Freedom of Information (FOI) deadlines and compliance are a tricky business so many government departments, universities and public bodies are finding themselves falling short of compliance with all the dire consequences that ensue. Whilst the Commons Justice Committee maintains that well-run public authorities can cut the cost of FOI considerably, how do you manage enquiries coming into various enquiry points? How do you achieve consistent levels of customer service, meet deadlines and monitor the outgoing information for compliance with privacy and legal requirements? Moreover, if you set up an in-house system for monitoring FOI and information enquiries what happens when the legal guidelines change as is highly likely?

A solution

Bailey Solutions Ltd, a UK based library software company, has created enquiry tracking software that handles FOI requests and other types of enquiries. The KnowAll Enquire™ system is highly flexible, configurable and designed to cope with changes in the compliance rules. Out of the box it comes with a FOI workflow which handles every stage of the acknowledgement, acceptance, rejection and appeal process.

The workflows can be designed so that mandatory stages cannot be by-passed and have to be processed in the correct order.

FOI workflow

Bailey Solutions developed KnowAll Enquire in recognition that there was a gap between traditional IT helpdesk systems, client relationship management (CRM) systems and library management systems (LMS) which were failing to meet the need for a specific FOI workflow and workflows for other information enquiries and requests. In addition to handling FOI requests the software can be set up to handle many different types of enquiries or information requests each with its own fields and workflows.

Streaming requests

Different types of requests can also be linked to the team that handles them so that each team is presented with a queue of enquiries relevant to them. For example the Facilities Department could receive requests about air conditioning and building faults, while the Print Room can have printing job requests directed to them. In turn the library could divide requests into general requests, inter-library loans, literature searches and subject specialist enquiries and direct them accordingly to the enquiry workers handling that type of enquiry.

The enquiry queue

Email requests

Many organisations find they have enquiries coming in via email to various

group and personal accounts and the problem here is that as FOI request could end up with an unqualified individual not trained to recognise the risks of getting it wrong. Individual email boxes are difficult to monitor and a team leader may be totally unaware of the situation. KnowAll Enquire works by intercepting emails sent to a group email address so all requests end up in the dedicated system. Emails sent to an individual can also be forwarded to the system. So there is no need to change user behaviour

and a variety of submission methods is encouraged.

Contact options

Emails may have a deadline in the body of the message but are not apparent in the inbox and nor are the statutory response times. In KnowAll Enquire statutory response times can be automated so at each stage the software can be programmed to send an alert if the appropriate action has not been taken within the prescribed timescale.

One point for enquiry recording

Enquiry workers benefit from a dedicated enquiry handling system as all the tools to receive, answer and record the enquiry are in one application including emails if they need to communicate with the requestor. The enquiry is a record in one place of all activity associated with the enquiry. It is easy to pick out FOI enquiries from a queue:

The enquiry list

Accounting for time

With group email accounts it is difficult to know who has worked on an enquiry or for a team leader to ensure there has been a consistent response. In KnowAll Enquire messages templates can be

used for a consistent response and the enquiry worker is clearly identified. A timer function promotes accurate time recording which counteracts any tendency to under-estimate or under record the actual time taken which in turn can provide mis-information about the actual time spent on enquiry work and potentially lead to staff redundancies. The current reasons for rejection are also included and, if required, can be changed at a later date.

Information requested is a 'business as usual' request	business as usual
Information requested is personal information	personal information
Information is already accessible	already accessible
Correspondence address has not been supplied	address not supplied
Request is illegible	illegible

Table of reasons for rejection

Sharing knowledge

A searchable knowledge base encourages enquiry workers to learn from each other and potentially saves costs as enquiry workers may find they can re-utilise work done on similar requests. In addition a public FAQ database and can save the enquiry teams having to answer the same question repeatedly. Team leaders can keep an eye on the enquiry queues and make sure that difficult or 'unpopular' requests do not languish unattended. It can also help leaders to spot training gaps in their team.

Statistics

Unlike email inboxes a dedicated enquiry system creates statistics as the entries are submitted, processed and completed. This saves times keying this information into a separate database and it is more accurate. This makes is very easy for senior managers to review performance across all teams from one common reporting mechanism. Standard management reports include types of enquiries answered, input method, input time, time spent on enquiries, satisfaction levels, costs incurred, length of time to complete enquiries and of course deadline and SLA compliance. Further reports can be created as required.

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A systematic approach reduces risk

In essence, KnowAll Enquire reduces chaotic, disjointed or inaccurate enquiry responses that can lead to fines, public humiliation or loss of confidence in the enquiry service. By monitoring the service more closely the team leader can work to ensure that the customer experience is improved while statistics provide evidence that staff and information resources are justified.