Using Self-Service to run an Efficient Prison

This document describes and quantifies how prisons use prisoner self-service to administer a prison more efficiently and hence save staff resource and money while simultaneously improving service and helping prisoners to shoulder responsibility.

The product

The product takes many routine but vital prison processes: visits booking, applications, meals, notices, surveys, activity scheduling, prisoner communications, prisoner finances and uses technology to take them from paper driven with multiple prison officer interventions to IT driven with few and often no requirements for prison officer interaction. As a result this reduces mundane administrative activity by prison officers, saving staff time and enabling prisons to work more effectively.

The product also assists prison management by providing up to date information on prison performance: purposeful activity reports, unlock reports, applications progress reports, security reports giving vital operational information to run an effective, rehabilitative prison.

The system also gives confidence to prisoners that applications and other requests are handled efficiently. In comparison the existing manual processes are error prone which creates “pockets of frustration” in prisons. Also the system requires prisoners to shoulder more responsibility rather than being infantilised and so prisoners are better prepared for life after release.

Product Deployment

Unilink’s self-service product is deployed in all seventeen privately operated prisons and three public prisons in the UK plus four sites in Australia/New Zealand. It also operates in several immigration detention centres in the UK and one in Austria. The product is widely used with over a billion prisoner transactions alone; one prison alone does more than a million prisoner transactions per month. Hence the product is well tested, reliable and has been continuously developed since 2007.

Evidence Based Practice: York University Study

Prof C McDougall from the University of York studied the effects of self-service and found:

- A reduction in adjudications
- A reduction in reconvictions
- Reduced staff sickness
- Significant savings in staff time
- Prisoners taking responsibility for finances rather than asking staff
- Initial usage slow (from CCTV) but later “a hive of activity”

Concerns often expressed about reduced prisoner-staff interaction were not borne out in practice: interactions between prisoners and staff about missing deposits or other administrative issues were handled by prisoners instead. Both staff and prisoners agreed that self-service was “a good thing”.

An Officer’s Story: HMP Kilmarnock

Before flicking the switch I had the important task of briefing the SMT on our progress. The Director at the time asked me to explain to him some of the things that the system could do.

“Well Sir,” I started. “We can manage prisoner’s personal finance, wage payments and private cash. We can complete checklists on admission, record biometric data and keep electronic narratives. We can do Cell Sharing Risk Assessments, allocate personal officers and manage our empty spaces. We can evidence our Purposeful Activity, allocate workspaces and coordinate visit spaces. We can manage our shop stock, track purchases and give itemised receipts.”

Again, anyone who has given a similar presentation to their Governor knows that I was met with scepticism. “We can also track staff clocking in and out of the prison and there’s one more thing, sir. We can get prisoners doing much of this themselves on a self-service kiosk.”

I will not say what he said immediately but thankfully we managed to convince him, and very soon after the implementation of the main system we were ready to get up and running with our kiosks.
Case Study – the 800 bed prison

This example uses actual figures (Oct’ 15) from an existing prison normalised for an 800 bed size:

The pie chart shows which are the main transactions: applications, balance enquiries, canteen shopping, menus, notice board, timetable, visitor requests, visits enquiries and booking. For each of these transactions there exists essential staff functionality: many departments receive prisoner applications (requests) and can respond or the request can be automatically approved and scheduled. There is an essential prisoner finance function and also equivalent canteen, catering, scheduling and visits tracking functions. One of the most innovative areas is to allow prisoners to schedule their own visits. While at first site this seems risky the system contains all the security rules necessary to ensure that visits are booked in accordance with PSIs and local prison requirements. This system has been used to book over 5,000,000 social prison visits.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Transactions</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Per week</th>
<th>Prisoner/wk</th>
<th>Secs/transaction</th>
<th>Hours saved/wk</th>
<th>FTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Visit Booked</td>
<td>3,498</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Request New Visitor</td>
<td>1,070</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit Enquiry</td>
<td>18,976</td>
<td>4,285</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Not estimated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Menu</td>
<td>225,996</td>
<td>51,031</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Make New Application</td>
<td>12,944</td>
<td>2,923</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>146.1</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Applications</td>
<td>124,541</td>
<td>28,122</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>Not estimated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Balance Enquiry/print</td>
<td>108,529</td>
<td>24,506</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>Reduced to 25%</td>
<td>280.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Canteen Shopping</td>
<td>17,972</td>
<td>4,058</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Reduced to 20%</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notice Board</td>
<td>140,508</td>
<td>31,728</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>Not estimated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetable</td>
<td>126,837</td>
<td>28,641</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>Not estimated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Transactions</td>
<td>531,330</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total hours saved</td>
<td>610.2</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Staff equivalent</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From HMIP Report: HMP Ashfield unannounced inspection Aug 2015

“Each wing had two electronic kiosks which provided an efficient and effective service. Prisoners could use a range of services through the kiosk including ordering food and shop items, making applications and booking visits. The prisoner notice board was accessible on the kiosk, enabling the director and staff to communicate directly with prisoners. This electronic system meant staff spent less time dealing with paper applications and could spend more time building relationships with prisoners which contributed to the smooth running of the prison”
A prisoner’s story....

I first came into the prison in 2009; there were no kiosks. In order for me to find out information on what was going to be happening to me, I attended the induction programme, and I found it to be very useful but there was a great deal of information to take in – how to get a visit with family, how to get money on your phone, when you will be eligible for a move to the open estate.

If I wanted some money put onto my telephone account, I had to get a member of staff to fill out a form for me, and then it had to be taken to the accounts department and processed before the money was available. You can imagine how frustrating it is when your telephone cuts off halfway through a chat with the wife, only to have to wait a day until money is put on the account, sometimes even longer at the weekends.

Everything which had to be done was done on a form, which was sometimes lost, or not filled in correctly.

Jump forward to 2015 – What can I do on the kiosks? Well for one, it gets me out of bed so that I can book my visits. I don’t need the staff to chase a booking clerk to check that my visits have been booked. My visitors can get an email or text to let them know when they need to be at the prison. I can choose my food for the next two weeks, and if I choose that I no longer want to have the macaroni cheese next Thursday then I can make the change myself – I don’t need staff to phone the kitchens for me anymore.

If I want to buy something from the canteen, we can see on our Kiosks if it’s in stock – we can even order our fruit and health supplements through the kiosk – No more missing stock order forms.

As I said earlier, there is a great deal of frustration when you phone runs out and of course this still happens, but at least now I go to my kiosk and top up my phone from there. If I’ve got the money in my account, I can transfer it to my phone. The greatest thing I have experience is the email-a-prisoner function. Being able to go to my kiosk and view messages from my friends and family is fantastic, and now that we can reply I can easily let my family know that I am safe and well.

The feedback I am getting from other prisoners is that the more the kiosks are updated, the more prisoners can take responsibility for some of the things which affect them and if we forget something there’s always the FAQs. The kiosks are bringing us closer to our families, they are linking those who have never used computers with the reality of today. They are reconnecting those who have forgotten about the outside world.

If we could have the in-cell kiosks, I would like to see access to educational material so that I can sit courses in the evenings. I’d be able to deal with much more and not worry about waiting on the wing kiosks being available. One day I might be able to have skype style video calls with my family.

Conclusion

Unilink’s prisoner self-service is proven in all the privately run UK prison estate and three public prisons. It is reliable having been thoroughly tested and enhanced since 2006. Independent evidence supports its use helping rehabilitation and enabling prison management to run prisons more safely with the same or fewer staff. Unilink’s prisoner self-service works.

About Unilink:
Unilink was established in 1994. The Unilink Group now employs 65 staff across four operating companies specialising in the Justice Sector. It is an award winning UK SME with multiple awards for Innovation (2011) and in 2015 won two awards as the overall UK Digital Leader as well as the best Citizen Services application for “email a prisoner”. Unilink is currently active in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Europe.

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