

Case Study

'Women Like Us' Go Solo with Soutron

Women Like Us is a dynamic and award winning social enterprise that helps employers find experienced, part-time staff and supports women with children so they can find flexible work. Women Like Us began in the playground. Founders Karen Mattison and Emma Stewart, two working mums themselves, recognised that here were women from all kinds of career backgrounds who wanted to return to work after having time off to have their children but just didn't know where to start.

In forming Women Like Us, Karen and Emma developed a range of services to help mums to get back into the workplace. Women Like Us recognises the unique needs of parents who have been away from the workplace for a long period – or who have perhaps never worked, and so provides career coaching for parents in some London boroughs. Help with building back confidence and finding career direction is combined with practical workshops on CV skills and interview techniques.

Women Like Us has expanded rapidly, and in July this year Emma and Karen ventured to Buckingham Palace to collect an award from The Queen for innovation. The pace of expansion however, meant that earlier in the year, the flow of information through the business was threatening to become unwieldy and it became increasingly important for this to be reviewed and restructured. The need to provide greater access to accurate and streamlined information to employees in the office or consultants in the field became a high priority for Women Like Us.



Women Like Us had been using MS Excel to record and store information; however as demand increased for access to the information it became increasingly cumbersome and time-consuming to update and distribute. In a bid to improve the information management, Women Like Us started to investigate database solutions to improve this process. 95 per cent of Women Like Us staff work part-time themselves, so a web-based solution that would allow consultants and users easy access to data whilst away from the office was crucial.

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Women Like Us appointed a Project Manager with a background in databases and library science to find a solution and to present this back to management. Armed with a detailed requirement specification and a fixed budget, a variety of different solutions were investigated. Recognising that a Library system database would offer much of the necessary functionality including excellent search capabilities, thesaurus control over terms, accurate and validated data entry and uncomplicated system management; the emphasis was placed firmly on procuring a database solution which applied library science principles.

Women Like Us selected SoutronSOLO as a solution that would offer the functionality they needed and could be delivered within their budget. The library catalogue management module incorporated a search interface (OPAC) and an integrated thesaurus for term control. Being fully configurable, it would also allow the systems administrator to easily define the fields and collection types accurately reflecting the content needed.

Working to Women Like Us' distinct requirements, a prototype database was created in SoutronSOLO and used throughout the implementation to test ideas and validate data and is now available as a training system. Soutron's project team configured the system to meet customisation needs, carried out the data conversion from Excel for the database and helped Women Like Us to create a thesaurus of subject terms and coverage areas against which their records are indexed. As the application was to be hosted by Soutron, the deployment needed neither input from internal IT staff nor any hardware investment by Women Like Us.

Sally Ryan, a Project Manager at Women Like Us says: "It helped enormously that management had a clear direction and gave me a firm mandate to deliver against. Finding Soutron meant that we could roll out a system that could meet the goals, budget restrictions and timescales that the organisation needed." Graham Beastall, Managing Director at Soutron, comments: "We have greatly enjoyed working with Sally to put this system in place. It demonstrates how library science can be applied to solve business problems in a cost-effective manner and without protracted implementation times".

Since 'going live' with SoutronSOLO, access to information has been simplified and greatly improved. It is now available 24 x 7 from any location via a web-browser and the data is now structured and entered easily with validation and control over terminology. The next stage for the system is to extend capabilities for feedback and rating of organisations and services. Whilst the system is currently being used for the initial purpose of the repository, it has the added benefit that it can manage a variety of other information assets as the need arises. Women Like Us now has the luxury of a system that will continue to support company expansion without any additional investment.