Customer
success story

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Crisis Together we will end homelessness
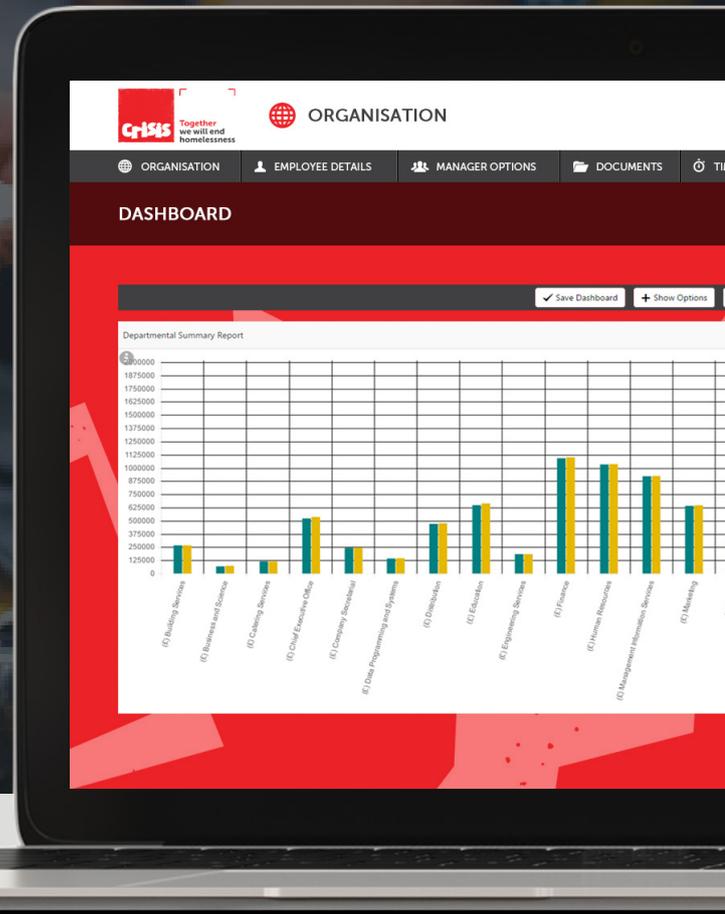
About Crisis

Crisis UK is the national charity for homeless people – helping people out of homelessness and campaigning for the changes needed to solve it altogether. Employees and volunteers work side-by-side with people experiencing homelessness, helping them rebuild their lives through education, training and support with housing, employment, and health.

⊙ Formed in 1967
⊙ HR operations team of nine supports over 600 employees
⊙ Ciphr customer since 2011
⊙ Interviewed July 2020

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Embracing data, systems, and processes to enable strategic HR

Until recently, much of the operation team's focus was on frontline support, with the more strategic elements of HR taking a back seat. Today, HR data, systems and processes, and their potential to make a positive difference to the charity, are also in the spotlight.

The move to put HR systems and processes at the heart of HR strategy is partly due to rapid expansion – headcount has increased by 92% in the last four years – which requires greater efficiencies, and partly by the proactive efforts of team to improve HR data, systems and processes.

"We've realised the importance of investing in our systems and processes, and taking that step back to work out how we can improve things," says Alex Taylor, HR manager – systems, data and process, who professes to have always been interested in the systems and data aspect of HR.

"In my career I've seen how taking the time to evaluate and design processes leads to better support for employees – it helps to take the stress out of activities such as calculating pay or annual leave, which cause substantial issues when they go wrong. Establishing the right groundwork – and working with Ciphr to improve our system functionality– means that we can really focus on the future of staff engagement and wellbeing."

Investing time and thinking in getting processes right also reduces stress within the HR team, adds Taylor. "I want to reduce stress within my team when we're running payroll, and ensure that customer service and customer experience of HR is at the highest level.

"This means our staff and HR team must have confidence in our HR system, its processing capability and the data output and reports that we produce – which helps to contribute to a culture where employees can trust HR. Ultimately, by automating as much of the system processing as possible, and maximising the efficiency and effectiveness of our processes, we get to do more fun stuff – we get to chat with and provide increased support for more employees."

Working closely with Ciphr to optimise system use

And it's thanks to Crisis's strong relationship with Ciphr that Taylor has been able to significantly improve the HR team's processes and efficiencies.

"None of what I'd wanted to achieve would have been possible if things didn't work on Ciphr's side," says Taylor. "Over time, our relationship with Ciphr has got stronger and better, and we've really seen the benefit of investing time in that relationship, especially with [customer success manager] Josh [Brown].

"My experience of working with Josh and the Ciphr team has been very good. With Josh, you know where you stand, which is always good. I think we have a shared mindset for practical discussions, which, for systems, is exactly what you want. I don't feel overwhelmed, or feel like I don't know what's going on, and things are always explained clearly, even when there is a technical aspect to discussions."

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One of the most significant improvements that Taylor has recently worked with Ciphr on is Crisis's annual leave calculations. "Last year it took us about two-and-a-half months to manually calculate annual leave and add in bank holidays for all our part-time worker records. So, we worked with Ciphr to design and customise a report, which means, this year, it took us two-and-a-half hours to do the final calculations, with bank holiday adjustments already included in the total. It's brilliant."

He adds: "The system works when we need it to the most – such as when we moved to working remotely in March 2020. We knew that even if people didn't have access to work laptops, they can still access Ciphr HR. The HR team stopped working in the office quite abruptly, and, even without advance warning, Ciphr HR worked perfectly for us; we didn't have to contact the service desk, we just had the assurance that the system was accessible and the functionality we needed was there.

"This meant we could make sure normal working life continued – that people could still log into Crisis net, they can still find out what's going on with their annual leave, and they know that if they need to book any leave, Ciphr HR is there. For us it meant that we could complete payroll processing remotely for the first time without any need to change configurations, which was critical."

Integrating HR with new L&D software

The switch to remote working in March 2020 also came at a critical juncture for a project linking Crisis's Ciphr HR system with its new L&D system, provided by Kallidus, via an application programming interface (API).

"Originally, we were going to link the two systems via SFTP [secure file transfer protocol] but, mid-way through our Kallidus implementation, they switched on their API functionality. So we had to stop everything, and speak with Josh and Lloyd [Salmon, Ciphr's data services team leader] and say: 'we know this is a more secure and reliable data integration method, so even though it's last-minute, can we make this work?'

"Once set up we conducted a lot of UAT [user acceptance testing], and we pretty much tested everything in depth and multiple times to ensure it was working, Whenever we went to Lloyd – which was on a daily basis for probably three weeks – he was there, things were changed either that day or the day after, so there was never a situation where we thought things were just being ignored or progress had stalled. There was always progress and feedback from Ciphr throughout the process."

The shift to remote working was actually a benefit for the project, says Taylor. "The API was configured while we were in the office and about three-quarters of the UAT was completed from home, which was helpful because we could be confident it would work on computers outside Crisis's IT infrastructure."

Linking the HR and learning systems has been "brilliant" for the L&D team, "because with the old system, they spent 90% of their time fixing or amending staff records. The API has taken all of that administration away; we know that staff records are right, because they're correct in Ciphr HR and correctly integrated, and that creates assurance for us while saving considerable administration time."

That assurance is particularly important for Crisis because of critical, compliance-based training that some of its employees must complete. "For client services staff at Crisis, the API means that anybody who works in that team has those mandatory trainings automatically associated with their record. It's not just less work for us, it's more accurate. It means we can be confident we are putting the right training in place for the right people where their safety is paramount."

Crisis is already planning its next phase of system rollouts and integrations. "We'll also be using Kallidus for our annual appraisals, which were previously all done on paper or in Word. We have enough confidence in the system and the integration with Ciphr HR – which was only launched in March – to roll that out just a few months later."

Adds Taylor: "Next, we'll be replacing our ATS and introducing a recruitment portal called Jobtrain. The ability to integrate new systems with Ciphr HR is exactly what we needed.

"With this integration, we want data to flow both ways between the systems. Although we need to upgrade to the latest version of Ciphr HR to make that happen, because we have that trust and relationship with Josh, we're confident the integration will be established after the necessary Ciphr HR upgrade."

Better decision-making with Ciphr HR's report designer

Another key way in which Ciphr HR is supporting Crisis is by enabling evidence-based decision-making through its report designer tool, which provides more than 200 configurable standard reports covering all aspects of employee data, while also enabling the creation of an unlimited number of bespoke reports.

Taylor explains: "What this functionality has allowed us to do is extract data within a constricted timeframe. We're not just meeting with managers and saying, 'it's important to note that sickness absence is X'. We can extract data and say, 'these people are off because of these reasons, the average sickness absence time is X, whereas the organisational average is Y. Therefore, let's speak about how we can best support staff back to work.'"

He says: "It adds legitimacy to the advice that we're providing, and that legitimacy comes from us not having to mess around trying to work out what the data is – the data is there in the required format almost instantly, and that gives us time to reflect and draw up recommendations before going into meetings."

Some HR professionals aren't especially comfortable with using reporting tools and data analytics, but Taylor says Ciphr HR's report designer is easy to get to grips with. "It's simple enough that when I'm training other people to use it – even if they don't share my love for data– they can pick it up and see the benefit of using it."

Crisis is also exploring how it can open up access to people data held in Ciphr HR to managers. "Now we have access to Ciphr's API key, we're looking to build data dashboards for managers in Microsoft Power BI that they can access instantly – meaning they can see crucial metrics about their team. Being able to do that helps us add value to our advice to the organisation– not just there to firefight difficult situations."

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A systems strategy with Ciphr HR at its heart

Taylor has a three-year HR systems strategy mapped out, with Ciphr HR right at its centre. "Systems and systems review are items that we are really beginning to prioritise," says Taylor. "First on the agenda will be upgrading Ciphr HR to the latest version, and optimising its use and full integrations of our systems." Next comes future scoping: "What do employees want? What does the HR team need – functionality such as fully mobile optimised staff portals and predictive analytics, for example," and assessing if it's possible to continue achieving their goals in partnership with Ciphr.

"The great thing with Ciphr HR – especially for charities – is that it does the basics really well, and you can get up and running with it without too much experience," says Taylor. "But when you want to start working with it in more complex ways, it can expand with you. So, if you're a charity – or any organisation – that wants to look at data strategically, or integrate your central HR data with different systems and make sure things work as efficiently as possible, you can do that with Ciphr HR."

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