

BETTER BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY REVIEW

Grown-up gaming

AT8's Mark Loosmore goes back to the future when he pays a visit to Durell Software



As a youngster I was the proud owner of a Sinclair Spectrum and wasted many hours playing some of the early computer games that drew a generation of teenagers into the world of computer gaming. Among my favourites was a game called *Harrier Attack*, which was based on the Falklands war (it had a huge following in my area; I was raised near the naval city of Plymouth). The game was created by Durell Software, which was also responsible for other game titles, including *Turbo Esprit* (a driving game that has since spawned many others such as the massive *Grand Theft Auto*) and *Scuba Dive*.

Fast forward 27 years and, as part of the AT8 series on IFA Practice Management, I interviewed Robert White, the founder and managing director of Durell Software. Imagine my surprise to find exactly the same company that authored the early gaming software that inspired an early generation of gamers, now creating IFA software. The world of gaming could not be further away from IFA distribution software so I was intrigued to find out more about Durell.

A perfect opportunity?

The move to IFA software seems to have been opportunistic. Looking to diversify from games software in the late 1980s, White wrote an application to automate the work processes of an investment manager who shared the office building with Durell. Then, by chance, White met an IFA employee in the car park one day who asked if he knew about financial software. The rest, they say, is history.

Durell's software is very different from many of the solutions on the market – both in terms of positioning and functionality – and it is worth exploring this before discussing the detailed functions.

White designed his solution around the belief it should cover all the needs of a financial services distribution business. It is not, therefore, just a contact management system as it includes financial planning tools, a comprehensive

accounting package, a document management solution, and a diary system. In other words, where other solutions have chosen to partner with third-party solutions – such as Inview for Document management, for example – Durell has decided to create this functionality directly itself.

Durell has also built the entire functionality for mortgages, life and pensions, investments and, most unusually, general insurance into its solution. Each function is sup-

Interface issues

The user interface is very 'grey', reminiscent perhaps of the many Visual Basic apps released in the 1990s and early 2000s. It is driven by a series of icons that are not standard industry icons so can be confusing on first use.

The technology is deployable in several ways. It can be purchased as a single user system or downloaded and run on a desktop or laptop computer, which will suffice for many smaller IFAs.

be tailored to the distributors' needs with relative ease, including building in specific validation rules for the data entered.

The factfind is designed to replicate the process matched in the paper version, which speeds data entry, particularly if the factfind is completed on paper in front of the client and then entered into the system later by an administrator or paraplanner.

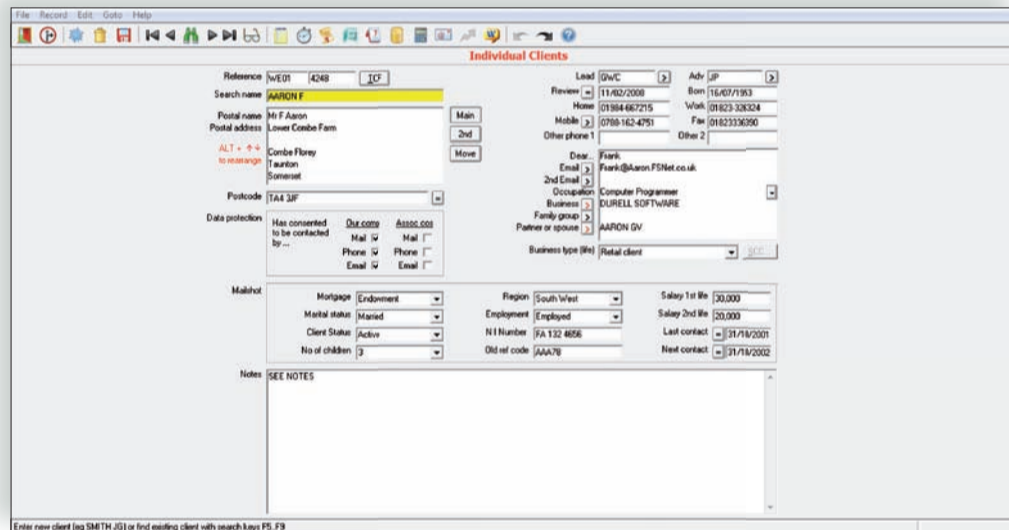
Such an approach does, however, miss some of the

fact, Durell includes multiple stopwatches. This means, if more than one task is being worked on, the user can switch between tasks easily, and the system will follow the activity being worked on, pausing the timers on others. The time recorded will then be directly transferred to the invoice system where an hourly rate is applied.

For retainers, the invoicing can be set up and automated so it can run every month. If the payment mechanism is known – and is consistent – it can also automate the accounting treatment so the money is automatically credited to the relevant bank account for later reconciliation. The invoices can then be printed out in batch mode, which will then be sent to clients, or PDFs generated to be e-mailed to the client.

Our focus on the back-office, however, should not mask the fact the Durell system also contains several financial planning tools, including one to help with the planning of pensions, protection, investment, inheritance, mortgages and annuities.

Durell has a loyal client base and some customers have been with them for 20 years. Similarly, Durell has loyal employees, having retained the programmers that worked on the original Spectrum games. It is undeniable that the company's software is not the most modern on the market but it has a differentiated product offering as a result of some interesting functionality. Durell's offering is aggressively priced, which will make it particularly attractive to the smaller distributors.



ported in a separate module so it can be switched off if it is not required (importantly Durell does not charge extra to keep each module).

This 'single solution across all needs' concept has been the goal of many companies over the years but it has rarely ever been reached. The benefits of a single-user experience – not to mention reduced costs – are substantial, yet the challenge has been to keep investing across the whole range of functionality and keep it all ahead of the game.

Durell has made a good attempt to keep its solution's functionality up with its competitors and, by adding modules such as the accounts package, are in some instances ahead of the game. The software does look a bit dated now, however, and as it is written in an ageing programming language – Microsoft VB6 – will need a rewrite at some point (like all software). Naturally, such updating will have to go across the full product suite, which will be a costly exercise.

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The software can also work as a multi-user solution with a shared database, allowing a team of advisers to work on the same client base (this is vital considering the ever-increasing focus on servicing clients effectively). A third, hosted option is available where the solution can be run from a central datacentre, where the application is set up and managed by Durell, thereby avoiding hardware set-up costs and maintenance.

The solution includes a series of factfinds, which can

benefits available from electronic data capture, particularly the streamlining of data entry by only asking relevant questions, which most electronic factfinds dynamically change. It is not a problem *per se*, but it does position Durell clearly as software used in the back-office rather than in front of the client.

It is this back-office functionality that offers Durell its clearest differentiators. I have often pondered the lack of accounting functionality with most IFA software packages but Durell has taken this challenge head on. For example, it has an accounting module that takes on the likes of the dominant Sage, and it addresses invoicing, logging purchases, tracking bank balances, profit-and-loss sheets and balance sheets. The best illustration of where this brings clear value is in the area of invoicing.

Time well spent

Durell includes a stopwatch facility that records time spent on different events. In

KEY INSIGHTS

- Back-office support should not just be Financial Services-specific – generic functions such as accountancy can also be adequately supported from a single package
- Solutions can effectively support more than one financial services sector in a single integrated solution
- Keeping the user interfaces current and appealing is a challenge when supporting a breadth of functionality with limited development resources