

# MEARS GROUP

*Driving employee retention and accelerating analytics to support multi-million pound growth*

## THE CHALLENGE

To drive its multi-million pound growth, Mears Group wanted to retain and develop talent from new acquisitions and deliver analytics services to an increasing number of business users.

## THE SOLUTION

Mears Group worked with IBM® Premier Business Partner Portal to create a business social network using IBM Connections™ Cloud, and a cognitive platform for insight based on IBM Watson™ Analytics.

## THE BENEFITS

Mears Group unites employees on a single social platform, boosting retention; up to 96 percent shorter time-to-insight enables a lean IT team to support a growing number of users.

- Unites employees on a single business social network
- Increase retention for talent from new acquisitions
- 96% shorter time-to-insight achieved



Founded in 1988 and headquartered in Gloucester, England, Mears Group is a leading social housing repairs and maintenance provider. Employing over 20,000 people in every region of the UK, the company maintains, repairs and upgrades the homes of hundreds of thousands of people, and provides domiciliary care services to around 30,000 people a year.

Mears Group implemented IBM Connections™ Cloud and a cognitive platform for insight based on IBM Watson™ Analytics—lifting employee retention and cutting time-to-insight by 96 percent.

### *Solution Components*

- IBM® Connections™ Cloud
- IBM MobileFirst™ Platform
- IBM Watson™ Analytics

*“Based on our previous experiences working with development partners, we were apprehensive about embarking on our mobile app project – but Portal delivered exactly the skills and expertise we needed,” says John Brett, IT and Business System Director, Mears Group.*

*“Working with Portal continues to be a great experience, and we wouldn’t be where we are today without them.”*

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## REACT FAST TO DELIGHT CUSTOMERS

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*Clear communication is a key factor in delivering outstanding customer services. However, the larger a business grows, the more difficult it can be for employees to work together effectively.*

This was the situation facing Mears, one of the UK’s leading provider of repairs and maintenance for social housing. As it grew fast by acquisition, the company aimed to deliver the same responsive, customer-centric services that had helped it achieve years of successful expansion.

“When I first joined Mears, we were a business of just 200 people,” explains John Brett, IT and Business System Director at Mears Group. “Today, we are more than 100 times larger, employing around 20,000 people. Much of that growth has been through acquisition—either by taking on additional repair and maintenance contracts or onboarding entirely new business units. These acquisitions are often very large, ranging from GBP60 million to as much as GBP250 million.

“In the IT department, the aim is to deliver services to help the business remain as agile today as we were when we only employed 200 people. We believe in our people’s potential: any of the new employees joining us by acquisition could one day become members of our senior leadership team – so retaining and developing talent is an important priority.

“As the business grew, it was becoming more difficult to onboard new acquisitions seamlessly, and to help employees to integrate effectively. Many of our operatives work in the field, which meant it was difficult to offer them information and support during the crucial first weeks working at Mears – increasing the risk of people leaving the business. We realised that adopting a more social way of working would help us to drive retention.”

*A second challenge was related to Mears' ability to gain business insight through analytics.*

John Brett continues: "As our business has grown, demand for analytics has also increased—and we see that this trend will only continue in the future. Gaining timely business intelligence insights is important because we work in an industry in which client decisions are driven by key performance indicators. Analytics insights help us to identify the cost drivers behind our KPIs and optimise our costs, which enhances our ability to win and retain valuable maintenance contracts.

"In the past, we relied on manual, spreadsheet-based approaches to analytics, which were becoming too complex and time-consuming to meet growing demand from the business. To solve the challenge, we looked for a way to provide our decision-makers with faster access to the information they need."

*"Our work with Portal is helping us to transform into a social, data-driven organisation."*

John Brett – IT & Business System  
Director, Mears Group

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## SELECTING AN EXPERT PARTNER

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*For many years, Mears has worked with IBM Premier Business Partner Portal to develop collaboration solutions to support its growing business.*

"Around the time we were considering the best way to meet our objectives for analytics and social working, we were collaborating with Portal to develop next-generation mobile apps for our field service engineers, based on the IBM MobileFirst™ Platform," recalls John Brett. "With Portal's help, we rolled out a platform-agnostic app that runs on lower-cost commodity devices—reducing our hardware procurement costs by 80 percent.

"We were impressed by the technical expertise and project management skills at Portal, and the success of the project gave us the confidence to partner with them to help achieve our long-term strategic goals."

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## BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

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*After considering collaboration solutions from a number of different vendors, Mears decided to create a social business network based on IBM Connections Cloud.*

“We had been using IBM Notes® and Domino® solutions to deliver email and calendaring capabilities for a number of years, and we knew that IBM has strong competencies in the collaboration space,” explains John Brett. “One of the things that impressed us most about the IBM Connections Cloud offering is the ability to bring employees together based on the skills they have in common, not just the area of the country that they work in.

“For example, by creating a community for heating engineers in IBM Connections Cloud, we realised that we could enable people with those skills to share their knowledge, document processes and answer questions—even if they were working in different parts of the country.”

Working with Portal, Mears is creating a business social network supported by instant messaging, online communities, collaborative document editing and more, starting with its central support teams for human resources, procurement, payroll and IT.

John Brett comments: “Our central support teams are located in 10 different locations across the UK, which can make it difficult for newcomers to the business to find the right people to answer their questions. The next phase will be to roll it out to our field service personnel too, enabling them to communicate and collaborate more effectively, both with each other and with our central support teams.”

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## DELIVERING A COGNITIVE ANALYTICS PLATFORM

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*To enable its lean IT team to support growing business demand for analytics services, Mears decided to implement IBM Watson Analytics—a cognitive, cloud-based platform for smart data discovery, exploration and presentation.*

“When we saw a demonstration of IBM Watson Analytics, it was almost as if it was tailored just for us,” says John Brett. “One of the challenges of our spreadsheet approach to business intelligence had always been data discovery. Using pivots meant that we were forced to assume what a trend might be in a given set of data, and then work backwards to try and validate that assumption.

“With IBM Watson Analytics, we simply upload a set of unstructured data into the cloud, and the solution automatically detects hidden trends, and suggests additional types of analysis we might want to perform.”

He adds, “Portal has been an invaluable source of guidance and technical insight— and that close collaboration continues today. Together, we are driving multiple complex projects within budget and to tight deadlines.”

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## RETAINING AND DEVELOPING TALENT

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*With new analytics and social business capabilities at the heart of its business, Mears is enabling the effective collaboration and fast decision-making it needs to continue its rapid growth.*

“Typically, when we acquire a business or take over a contract, we have only limited access to the people who will be coming over to work at Mears—perhaps meeting them in person only once or twice before the transfer of business,” explains John Brett. “We have already used IBM Connections Cloud to support the acquisition of a contractor—giving our new employees a space to ask questions and raise any concerns they may have.

“We predict that this approach will become part of our best practices for onboarding new businesses, and that it will boost employee retention from new acquisitions.”

*“We predict that this approach will become part of our best practices for onboarding new businesses...”*

John Brett - IT & Business System  
Director, Mears Group

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## BUILDING A SOCIAL BUSINESS

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*The IBM Connections Cloud solution is also helping Mears to improve communication between its central support teams.*

“The first two functions to benefit from the new collaboration platform were IT and procurement,” recalls John Brett.

“One of the first thing that we did in the IT department was to add a list of our software development priorities. Within a matter of days, the list became a launchpad for discussions with procurement, who made valuable suggestions to re-order the work based on factors that we might not otherwise have considered.

“We predict that IBM Connections Cloud will be a game-changer for our operations teams. For example, some

members of our social housing team are now using the platform to share information on key project milestones such as when office furniture and telecoms circuits will be delivered. Even though we’ve not yet officially delivered the solution to our operations personnel, we already have 30 communities each with around 30 employees – all of whom got up and running on the platform with less than half an hour of training.”

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## SATISFYING GROWING APPETITE FOR ANALYTICS

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*Using IBM Watson Analytics, Mears is offering its decision-makers fast access to the information they need to steer the business effectively.*

“IBM Watson Analytics is enabling us to get answers from our data in hours that might either have taken weeks or remained undiscovered before,” John Brett. “Watson’s ability to understand and surface the important information in masses of structured and unstructured data is an incredibly valuable resource, because it enables our lean IT team to satisfy growing appetites for analytics easily.

“For example, when our mobile telephony contract was due to expire and all of the potential vendors had presented their new proposals, we uploaded our historical telephony usage data and the new terms and conditions to IBM Watson Analytics. Within a matter of hours, Watson helped our procurement team to determine which of the new proposals offered the

best value.

“Another great example was when we were building a report for our human resources department, which showed that there was a sudden drop in workplace hand injuries in February and March. When we presented the report to the human resources team, they immediately recognised that the reason for the decrease was a health and safety education campaign they had run—which helped them to validate that their approach was working.”

## UNCOVERING HIDDEN TRENDS

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*John Brett continues: “On the other hand, Watson has also shown us that common-sense assumptions can sometimes be incorrect. For example, we wanted to find out what the main drivers for social housing repair costs were, and we had spent three weeks trying to analyse the data on spreadsheets. We thought the age of the property would be the most significant factor, but we were having a hard time testing this hypothesis.*

“Then we fed our data into Watson Analytics, and discovered the real answer in less than a day. In fact, the cost driver was how accurately our clients were initially diagnosing faults in their properties and the work required. The result was that our teams were being sent on site with incorrect equipment, and required more visits than usual to complete the work.

“By identifying the particular housing association sub-offices whose accuracy was below average, we were able to help our clients provide additional training to diagnose faults – helping them deliver more competitive, cost-effective

services.”

John Brett concludes: “Our work with Portal is helping us to transform into a social, data-driven organisation, and we are delighted with what we have achieved so far. We are confident that our new approach will help us to become an employer of choice – helping us to nurture and retain our people as we take on new businesses and contracts.”

## NEXT STEPS

Portal is an award-winning business and technology consultancy, helping some of the world's best-known brands transform their organisations for growth, productivity and profitability. Through expertise in Customer Engagement, Social Collaboration and Advanced Analytics, Portal combines the collective business, technical and

industry knowledge to help companies deliver a truly exceptional experience to their customers, partners and employees. IBM Analytics offers one of the world's deepest and broadest analytics platform, domain and industry solutions that deliver new value to businesses, governments and individuals.

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