

## Serving those who served



BLESMA is a national charity that helps limbless and injured veterans to lead independent and fulfilling lives. Founded just after the First World War, it has been supporting those injured in the Armed Forces for over 100 years.

The charity's members (numbering almost 3000), receive practical advice and emotional support from their regional BLESMA Support Officer (BSO), through visits and outreach. The organisation also helps with prosthetic advice, help with tribunals, mental health assessment, access to grants, benefits and employment opportunities, and organising a wide range of social and sporting events.

### **The requirement for digital transformation**

BLESMA has 80 staff, including volunteers. BLESMA were early adopters of the flexible working model, well before the pandemic made it commonplace, with around half their staff based at the charity's Head Office in Chelmsford, Essex, and the rest, including the BSOs working remotely.

But their IT systems weren't ideally set up to support this working model, so when they moved bigger offices in 2019, BLESMA saw it as an opportunity to also rethink their whole approach to technology, and to embrace digital transformation to give them greater flexibility.

They decided to move their systems from on-premise to the cloud, so that any staff member could access them from anywhere. The BSOs, some of whom had limited IT skills, were each using their own machines, so a key priority was to create a single standardised platform that would enable collaboration and data sharing.

### **A trusted IT partner**

BLESMA had been working with FOS as their IT service provider for over 10 years, so naturally turned to them for help. FOS created a plan to deliver a modern, cloud-based IT platform to complement the new offices and eventually allow them to decommission their on-premise IT.

"FOS are our trusted technical advisors, and effectively act as our IT department", says Paula Ferreira, Office and Facilities Manager.

"and they created a technical plan that supported the strategic direction of our organisation."

It was, at that stage, a long term plan, that would be implemented gradually, but the events of 2020 very quickly sped up the timeframe for implementation.

As part of the plan, FOS stressed to BLESMA the importance of getting the infrastructure in place from the start in the new premises. "When we selected the office, FOS helped us to engage with the architects and services, to make sure that everything was in place from the beginning to support our new technology and working model. Our site is an old Victorian building on London Road, which we refurbished into a modern office facility. We didn't have anyone with the required skills, so FOS represented us and worked with our suppliers to ensure that we had the hot desking, lights, breakout rooms and IT infrastructure we needed", says Paula.

## **2020 and the pandemic**

Then, of course, the situation changed - dramatically - with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. “In a flash, we had to go from 50% remote workers to 100%”, says Paula “But for us, it wasn’t the big upheaval that it could have been. Because FOS had already created a detailed plan for digital transformation of our systems, and to move to cloud-based IT, we were ready to roll. We didn’t panic, and we didn’t have to waste time thinking about what to do. We were able, with FOS’ support, to accelerate the plans we already had in place.”

FOS and BLESMA worked together to deploy the digital transformation and move their systems to the cloud. Of course the transition had to be managed in lockdown, with liaison between staff who were working from home, and they also needed to supply laptops to more staff, but all went smoothly.

BLESMA now makes the most of Microsoft tools including Team, OneDrive and SharePoint, which all team members can access from anywhere. They have implemented a staggered working environment in the office, but can still collaborate and share data. Remote workers can access the same platforms as the office staff, which has increased their level of engagement. The on-premise systems have been decommissioned, ahead of the planned schedule, and all staff find the new platform simple to understand and access.

## **Connection, collaboration, engagement**

“We are a more connected organisation than ever before”, says Paula. We collaborate far better as a team, and we also have a far greater level of engagement with our members.”

This project has been a great leveller within the organisation - there had been somewhat of a disconnect between the older, remote BSOs and the younger, mainly office-based fundraising and marketing team. Now, with everyone working remotely, all using the same tools and able to share files, there is greater collaboration. The BSOs now feel there is more connection between them and the head office staff, and the marketing team gets the BSOs actively involved in helping to communicate company updates and internal communications.

“Video calls via Teams have generated a lot more engagement”, says Paula “For example, our Director of Wellbeing has regular meetings with the BSOs, but used to do them by phone. With our new infrastructure, it’s so easy to jump onto Teams, even if working from home, or for those with limited IT skills. Video calls have kept everyone connected and actually enhanced our working relationships”.

Video has been particularly valuable in helping more members than ever to participate in the social events. When BLESMA’s activities team had to switch to virtual events, it actually opened them up to way more members. People who could not have gone on, say, a ski trip, can attend a virtual afternoon tea and meet other members from all across the country.

## **The future**

BLESMA doesn’t plan to remain 100% remote in the future, and is looking forward to organising face to face events, and having more people working in the office. But the benefits of this digital transformation are here to stay, and in the future they will retain the collaborative benefits of their updated technology platform.

## **Digital Transformation - a game changer**

“Digital transformation has been a massive game-changer for us”, sums up Paula “It has enabled us to work so much more collaboratively across our entire organisation, including head office staff, BSOs and members. Without FOS, and the plan they put in place, COVID would have hit us so much harder. But because of their foresight and guidance, we just had to accelerate what we had already planned, and the benefits have been greater than we could have imagined.”