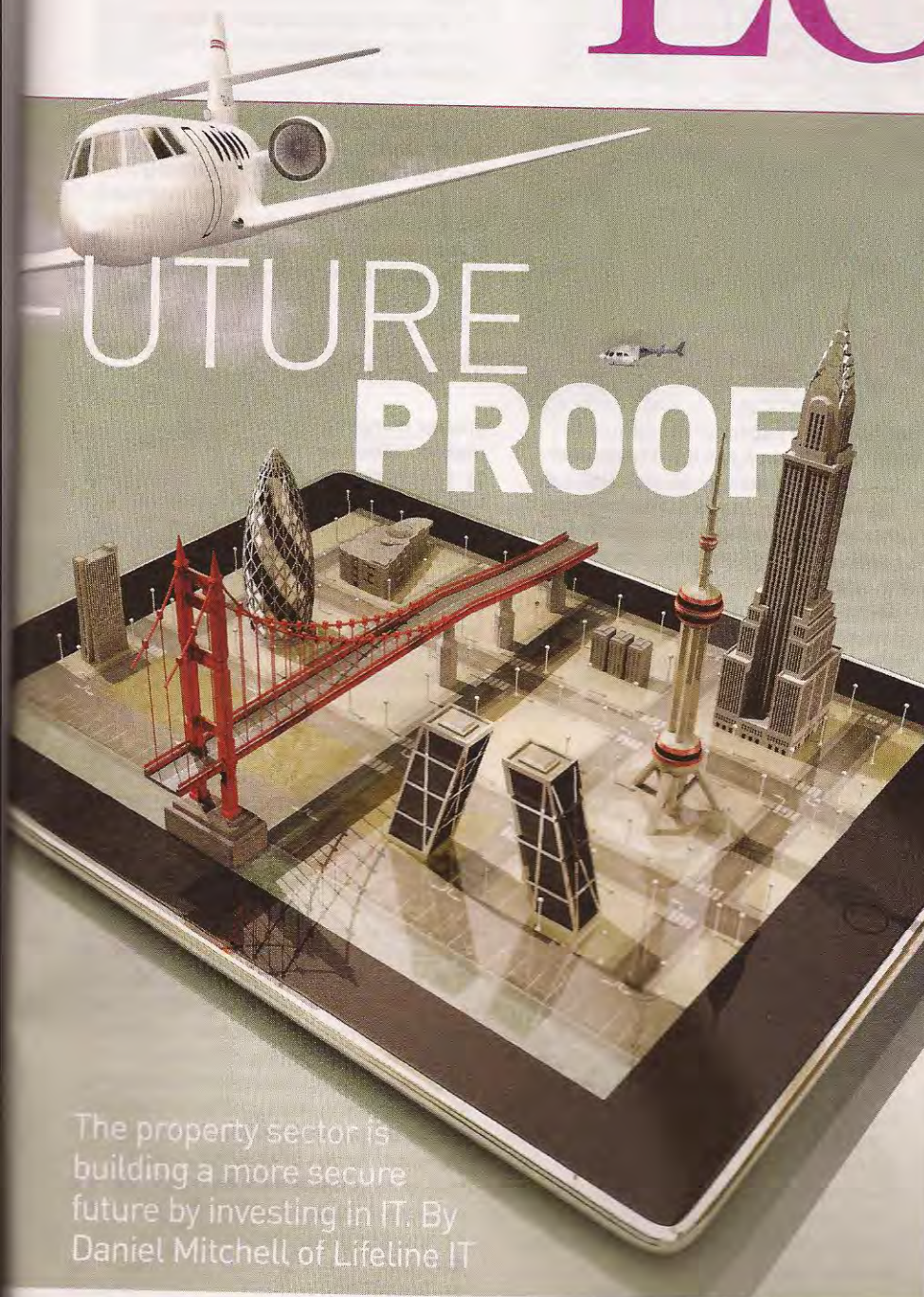


EGlife



The property sector is building a more secure future by investing in IT. By Daniel Mitchell of Lifeline IT

Challenging economic times within the property sector means budgets are tight and companies are looking to reduce costs in order to weather the financial storm.

Yet, when it comes to information technology (IT), there is a growing trend for businesses to invest rather than cut back, as the industry realises the benefits that technology offers.

Although the property sector was relatively late in adopting IT tools compared with other professions such as accountancy, technology is now crucial to its operations.

Witnessing this increasing reliance on IT is the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. According to Andrew Waller, a member of the RICS' management consultancy executive board: "Property

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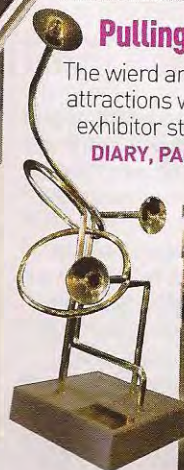
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ONLINE THIS WEEK

Estates Gazette's MIPIM hub pulls together all the news, views, videos, events and podcasts from this week's property industry show.
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management companies are now investing significant amounts of money in IT infrastructure to ensure they get it right. Without doubt, this is improving the quality of service that companies offer their clients, which is the most important thing.

"The results of recent benchmark studies carried out with property management firms have confirmed that the quality of IT is improving due to investment."

IT is a vital part of business operations at one of the UK's leading property consultancies, Briant Champion Long, whose agency, investment and professional teams advise on high street



our work is e-mail or online, so it's important that we have a safe back-up system in place. We archive and back-up with MessageLabs so that if we have a major issue, we can access information off-site."

The type of computer hardware used by the property sector has also changed in the past few years.

There is now an increasing trend for companies to break with convention and opt for Apple, as opposed to PC-based devices. Five years ago, it was mostly graphics and design companies that used Macs, but Apple is much more widespread in the property industry.

The driving factor for this growth is

"Property is all about data and pricing and in the fast-moving world of retail, you need to have this at your fingertips." Dan Simms, Briant Champion Long

shops, shopping centres, superstores and leisure property throughout central London and the UK.

Dan Simms, a partner at BCL, says: "Some companies may consider cutting back on spending in areas such as IT and marketing, but here at BCL, IT is crucial. Property is all about data and pricing and in the fast-moving world of retail, you need to have this at your fingertips."

BCL advises landlords and retailers on nearly 1,000 transactions each year and the need for reliable IT infrastructure is vital. The business outsources all its IT to a specialist supplier.

Simms says: "It wasn't that long ago that the industry was working from huge

documents of paperwork to complete transactions, but it has quickly adopted new ways of working to be more efficient in the way it does business. We're doing some very innovative things with IT, such as online sharing of information and data with our clients."

Increasing use of IT does present challenges for the property sector. One of the key issues facing many firms is the sheer volume of e-mails and how these are transmitted and stored.

A solution to this, which many companies are now adopting, is external e-mail archiving, where data is stored off-site in order to reduce pressure on the company's server.

BCL's Simms adds: "Huge amounts of

greater compatibility, as modern Microsoft Windows servers are better able to operate with Apple Macs, coupled with the increasing popularity of Apple's tablet device, the iPad – used as a presentation device in many firms.

But while greater use of IT has enhanced the industry and brought huge benefits to the sector, companies need to be aware of potential risks and ensure they have systems in place to safeguard their business.

Our own research has shown that many companies are failing to adopt safety procedures to reduce threats – an alarming 95% of businesses admitted that they found technology confusing and were lax about security.

HOW TO MAXIMISE IT BENEFITS WITH MINIMUM RISK

Although IT operations can be complex, there are some simple procedures that businesses can follow to ensure they get maximum benefits with minimum risk:

● Awareness

Keep yourself up to speed with what's happening in the IT world. Make sure you are aware of what is happening in your own organisation and among your staff – the growth in mobile communications now means that the majority of staff may be carrying confidential company data (such as e-mails or contact details) in their pocket via a PDA.

● Identify critical systems

Identify the IT systems that are crucial to your business, so that a recovery plan can be put in place to retrieve information in an emergency. What is the critical data you need to keep operating?

This critical data needs to be stored in a central location that can be accessed quickly – there is no point holding it on a

server or USB disk if no one can get to this in an emergency.

● Know the risks

The obvious risks are accidental, for example hardware failure or damage from flood, fire and theft.

A company can be at risk from its own employees, often unintentionally. Flexible working means employees could be using a shared family PC that does not have the same IT safeguards in place as a work computer.

Even systems designed to secure information can be vulnerable to security lapses – for example, passwords are often written down and left in unsafe places.

Workers are frequently travelling around the world with highly confidential information on their laptops, PDAs and tablet devices, which can be misplaced or stolen. Every week, nearly 1,000 business laptops go missing at Heathrow and only half are recovered, according

to PC manufacturer Dell.

● Establishing a recovery path

You need to plan your recovery scenario, should there be a malfunction in your IT systems. Plan for all potential emergency situations and consider different options for backing up your critical system data. Many companies are now choosing to back up certain data online, as well as using back-up tapes, which enable business-critical information to be accessed quickly from any location.

● IT security policy

Companies underestimate the importance of the IT policy, often thinking its sole purpose is for use during disciplinary processes. An IT policy should be a set of guidelines that all staff understand and buy into. Your policy must be concise to ensure it is read and understood – a couple of pages are sufficient.

www.lifelineit.net