

BETTER BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY REVIEW

Putting yourself to the test



Continuing his exclusive series for *Professional Adviser*, Mark Loosmore from technology consultancy AT8 Group analyses Training and Competence tools for advisers. Each week Mark selects a tool currently available to UK IFAs and assessed its strengths and weaknesses. Our aim is to help advisers compare and contrast solutions so they can identify the tools that may be most suitable for their businesses.

This week: Focus Solutions' TestMeOnline

With the increased focus from the FSA on professional standards, along with a widespread industry acceptance of the importance of developing new skills and keeping industry knowledge up to date there has been increasing interest in effective and efficient Training & Competence regimes.

Many of the existing schemes are still very paper-based and rely upon manual processes and resources. AT8 has been looking at how technology can and is being applied to this area, and identifying a number of the solution providers, so that we can bring some of the key features and success stories that may help advisers to consider what may be right for their own business needs.

Online testing

With this in mind, one of the companies that we arranged to meet was The Coaching Platform (TCP), which is now part of Focus Solutions Group. I had known of the Coaching Platform for a number of years – prior to the takeover by Focus – through its TestMeOnline service.

The solution has established itself by providing a range of reference material and online testing facilities for advisers studying for industry exams (and for wider development and maintenance of competence).

While it hasn't had the profile of the likes of the CII questions, it has partnered with organisations such as Redland Business Solutions to provide the testing content for its wider T&C solutions and is used by some significant organisations including Openwork (through Redland), as well as Vision/Mortgage Times and The Money Portal.

The standalone version of TestMeOnline has been effective, but limited to testing only until

the acquisition by Focus. Focus provides both front-office and back-office solutions to major financial distributors. The synergies with what I would loosely term middle-office functionality such as T&C, were clear.

However, the standalone solution needed to be more than just online testing, so Focus has invested in widening TestMeOnline to cover the following:

- Creating and managing development tracks, with events and record keeping;
- Creating development plans, along with the management and monitoring of ongoing CPD activities;
- Monitoring of supervisory activities training activity management (booking courses, rooms, equipment);
- Test management allowing the construction of tests from a question bank created by TCP's associates;
- Full support for qualifications up to Level 4.

These extensions are logical and necessary to have a competitive solution and I hope they will go further in the future. Having the T&C system linked to a POS solution has many potential benefits, if it is integrated properly. One can imagine a scenario where the POS or back-office solution has all the data on an adviser's activity: sales call levels, closure rates, average case sizes, persistence and complaints.

The T&C system could then use this data to create the learning and development plans, benchmarking against other advisers, setting new targets and action plans and assessing progress through the impact on KPIs. I am yet to see the functionality work this way, but I am assured that through the integration with the Focus POS system this is possible.

The vision of the solution looks

pretty good, albeit a bit narrow at the time of writing. So how good is the functionality that is there? Well, on first impression the end-user interface is modern and attractive. But when you start to look in more detail I admit I found it a little confusing. This isn't the first time I have written about an interface being over complicated, but in the past my comments have been levelled at systems that include functionality that is inherently complicated.

Missing pathfinder

I think it understandable that some user systems struggle with the such interface. With TestMeOnline I think they take a simple concept and confuse it with inconsistent navigation and a lack of sign-posting of where you are in the system and what to do next. There is no 'breadcrumb' trail or intuitive pathfinder process. However, the issues are by no means insurmountable, as an adviser will adjust to the system and learn ways around it, and it isn't yet an especially large system to navigate.

The online testing remains at the heart of the solution, with good content and professional testing mechanisms. The content is built by a group of associates, deeply knowledgeable in the subject areas, and implemented by The Coaching Platform team, which has more than 15 years experience of learning behaviour and development.

The solution gains more power when we look at the system from a supervisor's perspective and look at how the supervisor can build, store and share development plans, linking this through to the training and testing environment. For me, this functionality stretches the content away from pure testing to a real business application that can help to manage a salesforce.

The administration part of the system is driven by a generic training software solution from Cobent; a well-established generic solution that is clearly effective. Its language is not always consistent with the Financial Services industry, but it is proven and scalable and available on the open market.

However, The Coaching Platform must work hard to ensure its intellect, 'content' and configuration is sufficiently valuable and differentiated. In addition, it need to complete the integration of Cobent into the other products in the Focus product stable, making it look as a single consistent

system to prevent the larger clients from buying Cobent and adding their own content.

Overall, the vision of TestMeOnline is positive, and I have little doubt that both the standalone version and the integrated version can add substantial value to most financial services distributors, especially if they are already Focus Clients. Some of the execution of this vision still needs work, but I believe this is an early step on a longer journey that Focus and The Coaching Platform are making and I suspect the journey will be rewarding for both Focus and their clients.

KEY FEATURES

Learning and development plans	✓
CPD record keeping	✓
Training activity management	✓
Financial promotions management	✗
Case checking	✗
KPI management	✗
Complaints management	✗
Sales activity management	✗
Online	✓
Monitoring forms builder	✗
TCF tools	✗
Offline	✗
Regulated recruitment process	✗
MI reporting	✗

PRICE

The price per user for the standalone version of TestMeOnline is as follows: £110 per user per annum including content to support testing and learning up to Level 4; £85 per user per annum including content to support testing and learning up to Level 3
Minimum user numbers: 50

This data summary is part of a wider survey conducted by AT8. For more specific information, contact: marketing@at8-group.com

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