

Witness Name: Laurence Edward
Johnson

Statement No: WITN07620100

Dated: 06 February 2023

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF *LAURENCE EDWARD JOHNSON*

I, **Laurence Edward Johnson**, will say as follows:

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1. I have worked for Post Office Ltd since 1987 in the roles as follows:

Counter Clerk 1987 – 1995,

Helpline Operator 1995 – 1998,

Security Assistant 1998 – 2000,

Horizon Field Support Officer (HFSO) 2000 – 2001,

National Field Training Officer 2001 – 2004,

Bureau de Change Finance 2004 – 2013,

Bureau de Change Compliance/PIC Assist 2013 – present.

TRAINING OF HFSSOs

2. I commenced my duties as a Horizon Field Support Officer (HFSSO) in January 2000 with a two-week training course, which to my understanding at the time was a pass/fail course.

3. The course consisted of familiarization with the Horizon system itself including how to navigate through it, and the migration process, this being the transference of the accounts and stock at the Post Offices onto the Horizon system in readiness for going live on Horizon.

4. Throughout the course there was much emphasis on using the HFSSO Guide (the instruction manual which was always issued to the HFSSOs) throughout the migration process and that this should never be deviated from. The course was intensive and prepared me well for my day-to day-duties as a HFSSO.

DUTIES AND EXPERIENCES AS AN HFSSO

5. My duties as a HFSSO varied greatly on a day-to-day basis. To illustrate these, I will outlay the process of migration and training provided to the Post Offices.

6. The process commenced with migration, which took place the day before going live. Prior to this date, and approximately a week before the date of migration someone from the Horizon team, usually the HFSSO who would be carrying out the migration, would call the office to speak to the

Subpostmaster/Office Manager to advise of how the migration process would be carried out, and what would be needed from them in respect of this.

7. On the day of migration in general this would mean attending the office approximately one hour prior to the scheduled closing time. At this point the HFSO would introduce themselves to the Subpostmaster/Office Manager, familiarize with the office set-up, and advise how the migration would take place.
8. The migration consisted of the Subpostmaster/Office Manager completing a full account for the work that had taken place in the accounting week (Thursday to Wednesday) so far, including itemizing the cash & stock on site.
9. The HFSO would then input this into the Horizon system in readiness for going live the next day, create stock units on Horizon to mirror the current operation at the office and create the Horizon users.
10. Only staff who had attended the dedicated off-site pre-training were permitted to be created as users. What followed then were two days of onsite training from the HFSO following a specified schedule of subjects to be covered, and one further attendance for the next cash account to be completed.
11. At the time-period in question Post Offices completed a weekly cash account on Wednesdays. The only time the attendances for the Horizon training varied to this were if the office had migrated on Monday or Tuesday. If this had

happened as the next cash account fell into the period of the two days Horizon training no further attendances were scheduled although this could be requested, either by the Subpostmaster/Office Manager or by the HFSOs themselves if it were felt it were required. This was dependent on resource levels however.

12. As such my days could be migration, office training, or providing cash account support which sometimes could be two in a day as some Post Offices on the weekly cash account day closed at 13:00, some at 17:30 so with careful scheduling it was possible to attend two.

13. Occasionally the role also involved assisting at the regional office. This consisted of preparing weekly paperwork packs which were sent to the HFSOs or contacting offices due for migration as described previously.

14. This would in general be carried out by staff at the regional office if the HFSO scheduled for the migration were on leave in the week before migration. On some migration days I would not start out for work until 15:00, and it was a case of leaving the office only when the job was completed.

15. There were no set hours and migration nights could be very late, the latest being 00:30 for myself, though some colleagues did experience even later.

16. Every week we would receive a package detailing our next weeks work, which had to be dealt with. We also had our weekly paperwork to complete

consisting of our weekly expenses as sometimes we could be staying away from home 5 nights a week, plus our timesheets detailing hours worked.

17. As there were no set hours on the HFSSO role hours were on a rolling basis and as such had to be monitored and documented. In general, I completed my paperwork on a Sunday afternoon. I could also be travelling on a Sunday afternoon or evening to the hotel which I would be staying in, ready for Monday morning.

18. In general, if there were any requests for additional support it was for the cash accounting process which took place on Wednesdays. As only one account was supported it was sometimes remarked upon by Subpostmasters/Office Managers that the accounting process on Horizon appeared to be both complicated and a lot to learn with only one account being supported.

19. The only complaints that were ever made to me were not official complaints but more vocal complaints/ thoughts being aired from Subpostmasters/Office Managers who worked at offices that were already computerized (other systems included Ecco+, Capture, Richard Jackson) as they felt that those systems were more user friendly and fitted their needs better, such as printing certain weekly paperwork summaries which at the time Horizon did not do. This meant returning to completing the paperwork manually which was felt to be a backward step.

20. In terms of support we had the dedicated Horizon Helpline, our own management team, plus our HFSSO colleagues. From speaking with my colleagues regularly it seemed that it was very rare that with the support available to us problems could not be solved/dealt with. I only ever encountered one problem, this being one of my own makings on the migration process. I spoke to a colleague who advised exactly on how to deal with this and as such the problem was solved.

21. The management of the HFSSOs was good. It was acknowledged that we were the people "on the ground" so we were the best placed for any decisions to be made/action to be taken. At any point any of the management team could be called and would be both helpful and professional in the advice/assistance provided. Given the complexities of the HFSSO role and the Horizon Project in my opinion the management team in my area (IP4) were excellent.

TRAINING OF SUBPOSTMASTERS

22. The training for the Subpostmasters/Office Managers/Staff was good for some, not so good for others, this based upon in my opinion aptitude, attitude, customer base and staffing levels.

23. In terms of aptitude some of the people I trained were very familiar with computers so took to Horizon easily, whereas for some others this was the first computer they had ever seen or used, as such some were very wary and hesitant, and it could be difficult to achieve all that was needed to be covered in the 2 days of training.

24. With regards to attitude, some Subpostmaster/Office Managers were clearly reluctant in accepting Horizon, in these cases it could sometimes be a challenge to get them to give their full attention to the training.

25. In terms of customer base some offices had a customer base where most of the transactions were very similar. In these cases although it was possible to cover other transactions it wasn't known when or if these transactions would ever be required by customers.

26. As such how effective the training was in these cases would be down to the individuals at the offices and their notetaking and retention. Staffing levels could also have a big impact. If it were a busy office and the Subpostmaster/Office Manager had not arranged for sufficient staff to be present during the training period, this made it difficult for them to be able to participate in the away from the counter training that should have been delivered.

ADVICE AND SUPPORT ON HORIZON

27. In terms of advice and assistance to the Subpostmasters/Office Managers, I feel I was able to provide what was required for them to carry out their daily and weekly operations on Horizon sufficiently.

28. In some cases, it became apparent by the end of the first day that they were confident in the use of the Horizon system and were happy from then on for me to take a step back and only offer advice as & when requested.

29. That said I would still maintain vigilance to ensure that errors were not made unknowingly. In any cases where I felt that the Subpostmaster/Office Manager would need further support I fed these back via the management team.

BUGS, ERRORS OR DEFECTS IN THE HORIZON SYSTEM

30. During my time as an HFSO (January 2000 – March 2001) I was never aware of any bugs, errors, or defects within the Horizon system. I should also add that having worked as a National Field Training Officer from September 2001 until November 2004 the same could be said during this timeframe, I never saw anything on the Horizon system that gave cause for concern.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

31. My only other observations are, and these being company issues rather than IT, is that in my opinion the levels of support made available to our network of Post Offices were significantly reduced over a period of years starting from the early 2000s.

32. The size of the training team, who often used to visit offices to provide extra ad-hoc support was reduced from approximately 150 to 100 and the initial

training package offered to new Subpostmasters was reduced from two weeks training to one week.

33. Additionally, the seven regional helplines which were staffed by ex-counter clerks closed and were centralized to one new Helpline, the Network Business Support Centre.

34. All of these factors in my opinion led to Post Office Ltd offering lesser levels of support to Subpostmasters/Office Managers. In some instances, some of these may have had large unexplainable discrepancies on their accounts on the Horizon system.

35. During my tenure within the training team, I was asked to attend such offices and was able to identify errors which resulted in reducing the discrepancies, often with significant reductions.

36. Similarly in my tenure on the Post Office Helpline, often Subpostmasters/Office Managers would call in with large discrepancies and over what could be long telephone conversations, step by step myself and my colleagues would assist in identifying where the discrepancies were enabling a more accurate account to be posted.

37. Without this support it would be possible for discrepancies to be declared on Horizon that in reality were either not there or were much lower than initially thought, these errors having been made by human error.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed: **GRO**

Dated: 06 February 2023