

Department of Trade and Industry

Collating historic British Coal records

THE DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY PARTNERS WITH IRON MOUNTAIN TO REDUCE MINERS' COMPENSATION CLAIM TIMES AND TO OUTSOURCE THE FACILITIES MANAGEMENT OF A NON CORE ACTIVITY.

The UK's coal industry employed over 1.1 million miners, in 970 deep mines at its height. Long hours in hot, dusty and cramped conditions have taken their toll on many miners and the long-term effects on their health have only come to light in recent years.

Illnesses such as Vibration White Finger (VWF), which affects younger miners who operated heavy-duty drilling equipment for long periods of times, and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), a chronic lung disease aggravated by inhaling coal dust, have made headlines as more miners have claimed compensation from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). These claims include a number posthumously made for relatives who were affected by such diseases.

Owing to the huge number of miners affected by these conditions, a lead court case judged in 1998 that the DTI should set up schemes for both COPD and VWF allowing those affected to apply for compensation without having to go through a lengthy court proceeding.

“ Since the modernisation of the process began, Iron Mountain has developed a fully automated, technologically advanced infrastructure to support the claims handling process. This has created efficiency gains throughout the entire process and as a result, the average claim takes just 17 days to be processed within the Iron Mountain environment, instead of the previous average of 4 weeks. By outsourcing the management of our sites and the entire records management process to Iron Mountain, we are sure that these vital records are in the hands of professionals.

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DTI spokesperson

Since 1996, 169,000 claims have been made for Vibration White Finger and 650,000 for COPD – a total financial liability of in excess of £8 billion, the largest personal injury claim made globally to date.

To process these claims, the creation of 'record packs' containing employment files for each miner detailing earnings and work history was required. At first, the DTI expected only a small number of claims to be made and the first packs collated were predominantly paper-based. However, due to a surge in claims when the schemes were announced, the DTI needed to develop, among other processes, a records management programme which would transform the collation of record packs from a small paper-driven process to an automated, digitally scanned service for the many thousands of packs requested on a daily basis.



In 2003, Iron Mountain, the world leader in outsourced records and information management services, took over the operation of this process and currently manages one site for the DTI; Cannock in Staffordshire, on a full FM basis; where all employee documents for the former British Coal Corporation are stored. (Some 3,654,666 documents across 27,950 sq feet). 12 former Hays employees were TUPED across to Iron Mountain at this stage. Previously a coalmine, the site at Cannock is now a secure records centres, fully racked to store paper files.

The first step taken was to organise and fully index all of the existing files for miners, which had previously been stored in various guises at different sites, using site-specific index criteria. This process took 24 months, and almost 3.7 million documents were catalogued on a database so that records could be tracked quickly by staff and the number of “no traces” reduced.

When a claim is made on behalf of a miner by a solicitor, Iron Mountain receives a request to compile a record pack. By conducting a search using a claimant’s national insurance number, date of birth and surname, the Iron Mountain staff can locate the miner’s employment history and earnings records for the pack quickly and efficiently. The record pack is collated within 5 days. The pack is then created in hard copy documents, and then scanned to create a digital image of the pack. The “electronic pack” is then sent to the miner’s solicitor and the DTI (simultaneous and dual disclosure), to support the compensation claim.

In cases where records are missing or destroyed, the DTI previously was unable to compile a record pack. In order to provide an additional service for the DTI, Iron Mountain wrote to over 169,000 previous employees of British Coal, all of which had claimed for VWF, asking them to become witnesses and have their details stored in a new database developed by Iron Mountain. A significant number replied and now act as potential witnesses for claimants whose claims are stalled within the system due to a lack of evidence.

It is likely that further work-related illnesses will come to light amongst the mining population. Now that the infrastructure is in place for the Coal Health Claims Unit’s records management and retrieval process, Iron Mountain will be able to process requests for claimants’ records, ensuring that claims are dealt with effectively and efficiently.

Iron Mountain is contracted to turn around 5,000 packs a week. However, during some periods of operation, Iron Mountain has collated 8,000 packs a week, providing a swift, efficient service for the DTI.

“By creating a fully automated service for the DTI, we’ve been able to provide records quicker thus supporting the ongoing processing of claims which is in line with the DTI’s key strategic driver, namely compensating miners as quickly as possible for their injuries. Using our experience and heritage as the world’s trusted partner for records management, we’ve developed a comprehensive and accurate system that both met and then exceeded the DTI’s expectations.”

Mike Dunleavy

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