



How an educational federation in rural Northamptonshire became one of the most technologically advanced groups of Primary Schools in this country – underpinning their vision for how teaching may evolve in the UK

The Background

Forest Federation are four small, vibrant, forward thinking village rural Primary Schools based in the beautiful countryside of South Northamptonshire. The first three schools – Whittlebury CE Primary School, Tiffield VA Primary School and Stoke Bruerne CE Primary School were federated in 2012, and Gayton CE Primary School joined in 2016.

They range from 45 to 75 pupils at each school, and are united by the common purpose of helping children live their daily lives by up-holding Christian values. The Federation pools its strengths and experiences in the classroom, with clear leadership and governance in order to create a richer learning experience for all its children. Like most rural schools they attract children from many backgrounds – some gifted, others with certain educational needs. What is perhaps more unique is the enthusiasm and the infectious vision of the leadership team.

“We see ourselves as one big family across four sites. We are passionate about smaller schools – we are not weighed down by the challenges that larger schools face – yet we can go as far as we want – we are not constrained in any way”.

Eliza Hollis, Executive Headteacher

The Challenge

Like many schools, technology was not where they started their journey, but it quickly became a potential stumbling block. The leadership team had set about modernising their structure, culture and approach, before realising that their IT infrastructure was becoming a constraint.

“Our servers were 8-9 years old and were getting full – yet no one knew what was on there. Technology had moved on, but we hadn’t. Whilst everything worked, it was more by luck than judgement. We simply did not have an IT strategy”.

Dan Lister, Chair of Governors



With staff frequently working across multiple sites – and pupils too – they realised that they were all carrying heavy laptops, tablet devices and all the paraphernalia that each require, on every trip. On arrival at each location, they needed to log-in to local networks, remembering different passwords and not able to access the files they needed. This was compounded by each school having a slightly different set-up, with different devices, and failing to procure replacements in a cost-effective way. It was not in keeping with the ethos that they were adopting in other parts of school life and they had to find a way to work seamlessly no matter which school they were in.

As a group of smaller Primary Schools, they had historically chosen to work with a small, local technology firm. Initially they approached them with their dilemma, but they were unable to suggest a viable alternative solution – beyond buying more servers.

They therefore went to the market, putting a tender together for a new IT partner, who could work with them to overhaul what they had, and take advantage of the latest technology out there.

“We were honest in that we were not looking to save money – what we wanted was the best solution for our needs. We wanted a technological solution that would improve our offer, and lead to efficiencies down the track. We were also keen to develop something that was scalable and could grow with us”.

Dan Lister, Chair of Governors

Selecting a Technology Partner

As they put their tender list together, one name that was suggested was RM. However the initial reaction from the leadership team was one of a reticence. Whilst their personal experiences were somewhat dated, their perceptions were of a large, impersonal organisation with poor support structures, complacent on past glories, and dogmatic – if not arrogant – in approach. In fact the exact opposite of the type of partner that Forest Federation were seeking.

Despite this, they met with RM and whilst impressed with the initial sales pitch, remained suspicious of what was promised and how the two organisations could work together. However, over subsequent meetings that changed, and before long a real bond began to build.

“What did it for me was that RM listened. They tailored their subsequent response to what we told them, and came back with something that matched what we wanted. They showed me that they really wanted to work with us. Even though we were forced to meet remotely over a video call, I felt I could trust them... and as we got to know each other that feeling grew”.

Eliza Hollis, Executive Headteacher

The tender process ran its course, and the Federation’s growing positive vibes were matched by the written responses they received, with RM’s proposal proving best value – outscoring the three other suppliers on cost and quality.

The next step was to build the Business Case. RM and the Federation’s Business Manager worked together on the numbers, and RM recommended a number of opportunities to gain extra funding – from the [DfE digital education platform scheme](#) to supporting their application to the Government’s [Rural Gigabit Connectivity \(RGC\) programme](#), and through to accessing a special hardware arrangement with HP, where the school are able to trade in old devices for a cash payment to be invested in new machines.

“I was looking for honesty. RM were very clear on what it would cost us – I didn’t feel we would be hit with a load of hidden costs – everything was transparent. It felt like a genuine partnership”.

Dan Lister, Chair of Governors



Gaining Buy-in

As with any investment – whether you are part of a school or a commercial business – getting buy-in is critical. In this case, RM played an important role in helping the Federation develop their case, but stood back and let the Federation’s leadership team champion the approach.

The Federation’s Deputy Head – who is also the Computing Lead – joined many of the early meetings with RM. In this regard she was representing the teachers – she listened to the strategy and was able to translate that to what it would mean in the classroom. The School Business Manager did the same, on behalf of the administrative parts of each school – again representing those users who would be using the system to run the schools.

In parallel, the leadership team took the Business Case to their governors. As a well constituted board, with a number who were IT savvy and fully appreciated where the leadership team were taking the Federation, they also trusted the executive team – so whilst they were robust in their challenge – they backed the rationale that underpinned the proposal.

“We had perfect triangulation – we had the school administrators on side, we had teaching and learning covered, and we had the governors bought in. All three legs came together – firmly committed to the proposal”.

Eliza Hollis, Executive Headteacher

The Solution

Forest Federation were looking for a new approach to IT. Something that was forward thinking, future-proofed, and would open new doors for their schools, using technology as the enabler for their broader plans.

What RM came up with was something that did all of this and more. They were able to unpick what had gone before, and virtually start again. They bought the schools out of their existing connectivity contract, replaced all of their physical servers with the ability to manage everything in the cloud, rolled Microsoft Teams out across each school to support Remote Learning, and replaced all computer devices with modern new (ruggedised) ones on a 1-for-2 basis which is almost unheard

of in Primary Schools. They installed RM Unify to improve remote capability and provide access to all teaching and learning resources, and provided screen sharing capability so pupil devices could display work seamlessly on the new plasma screens. With the move to the cloud, these new devices needed less local storage and processing power, making them much more affordable. RM installed wireless connectivity throughout all buildings, removing all cables that tend to clog up workstations and benches, as well as replacing each school's traditional analogue telephone system with a modern VOIP network that works over their internet network, routing calls to wherever staff are on any one day.

As well as helping them apply for the respective government and supplier grants and rebates, RM set up a concierge service to benefit from an HP Trade-In scheme, whereby RM would manage the collection and return of some 100 devices that the schools had, processing the rebates from HP that were then paid back to the school – something that would otherwise have been a huge task for a small Primary School to manage, and allowing the partnership to deliver further value for money.

Like most schools, Forest Federation has students with different needs. RM highlighted a number of helpful tools that they could consider – such as an Immersive Reader – for those students with a visual impairment, helping them manage screens with different colours, virtual rulers and even software that would read to them. Best of all, any student can log in with headphones so no-one in the class need know they were using it.

Other students are now able to access dictation software (using existing features within Office 365), allowing them to produce work that in the past would have proved challenging, with output that they can take home to their parents. Best of all, the newly negotiated licensing agreement with Microsoft permits parents to access the system from home, at no extra charge.

RM also arranged training for all staff, and ensured that the school were fully GDPR compliant – replacing outdated and potentially weak processes, such as local file storage. They put in place a support structure via a single phone number to call for everything (given most issues can be managed remotely via the new cloud-based set-up), coupled with emergency Technical Support who can visit if needed. All warranties on hardware have been secured such that an engineer would be on site the next day in the event of any breakdowns.

Historically the school had taken a range of licences and warranties for their various software and services on an iterative basis. RM replaced all of these with a simple proprietary licence from Microsoft, providing licences for application software and full device management.

Perhaps most interestingly, the financial model has been designed to amortise all set-up costs over the term of the contract, with the school paying a flat subscription price for all services, and an operating lease for the hardware. This was then arranged on a per pupil per term basis to make budgeting easier, which together provides the school with complete peace of mind, knowing exactly how much they will pay.

"I believe we are one of the most technologically advanced group of Primary Schools in the country. I do not know anyone who has done what we've done".

Dan Lister, Chair of Governors



A key part of this is the role that RM plays in ensuring that this innovative approach works.

“What put me off RM before all this was that they only worked in the Education Sector, and I was worried how forward looking they were. I now see that as their strength – it is because they only work with schools that they truly understand how we operate and what we need from technology”.

Eliza Hollis, Executive Headteacher

The Benefits

In teaching and learning, it has allowed Forest Federation to share resources in a totally seamless way. Teachers can log in from any location and share their lessons – they do not physically need to move resources around, which in a Covid world, is a fully social distanced way of teaching.

“If we have a teacher off sick, we do not need to find a Supply Teacher. With the technology we have in place, we can just carry on as if they were still here – with a teacher stepping up from another school, taking lessons over MS Teams”.

Dan Lister, Chair of Governors

It has revolutionised the way the school communicates – whether that is holding cross-school assemblies or even getting all pupils to participate in shared worship.

The technology itself is the latest on the market, and they have peace of mind that it will be replaced and upgraded before it becomes end-of-life. The devices themselves are all-in-one – operating seamlessly as staff (and pupils) move between each school in the Federation – including from home.

“I need four different email accounts – one for each school – but they all now appear in one list – easy to access, so that none can ever go missing”.

Eliza Hollis, Executive Headteacher



From an administration perspective, they are able to route telephone calls to whichever site a member of staff is at. If they need to print off a document that needs to be signed, they can direct it to the nearest printer for that person to access – irrespective of school – print it, sign it, and scan it back again – securely and efficiently.

BACS banking runs can now be done from one school, with the respective line items forwarded to the appropriate person in another school.

“Strategically, it means that our schools are at the forefront of new technologies. Because of RM’s relationship with people like Microsoft, our small Primary Schools in rural Northamptonshire have access to the experts in Seattle, USA”.

Dan Lister, Chair of Governors

The beauty of this sort of cloud-based system is that it is so easy to expand as the needs of the school changes – it is as simple as making a phone call. That would have been a major piece of planning (and budgeting) before. Likewise if the Federation add new schools in the future – all can be accommodated modularly with this approach.

Financially, the school have complete control over their budgets – they know exactly what they are going to pay and when.

Training is a key issue for most schools. With this approach all of the staff in each school have had access to the necessary training to make the most of the systems, and they know that RM is there in the background as they need more.

“We took the decision to start again, and some schools may feel they cannot do that. I am not sure I agree – in my experience technology in so many schools is out-dated – doing something like we have done can revolutionise any school – you do not have to be a brand new Free School to benefit”.

Dan Lister, Chair of Governors

Another concern may be a nervousness about “putting all your eggs in one basket”, giving everything to one company to manage. However, the reality is that for many schools they are just too busy to have to deal with a multitude of different suppliers.

“This all-in-one solution is unique to RM. No-one else could have put this together – no-one else does everything from telecoms to broadband, software to hardware, and runs the network for you too. The great advantage is that we have just one person to call for everything – if something goes wrong, it is up to them to sort it – no buck passing about whose system is to blame”.

Dan Lister, Chair of Governors

The Lessons Learnt

- 1. Have a vision.** As schools evolve, their technology needs to change with them. For many schools, it can be an afterthought, and decisions made on the basis of what they have, not what they need. Set a clear vision and go for it.
- 2. Invest in the future.** Sadly IT is not cheap, but there are many grants and rebates available, if you know who to ask. It is also an investment that can reap efficiencies elsewhere that justify the investment.
- 3. Choose your partner wisely.** Schools are very good at teaching, but they cannot be expected to know everything. A third-party technology partner can help, but make sure you select one who understands your needs, is someone you can trust, and is a company who will put your interests first.
- 4. Take people with you on your journey.** Human beings can be wary of change, but getting their buy-in can make that change easier. Seeking advice from those who have done it before, whilst ensuring everyone’s interests are met, is a simple way to get things done.
- 5. Find a champion.** Whilst the above is true, having an internal evangelist that your people respect and listen to, will persuade even the most sceptical of audiences.
- 6. The cloud is the only solution.** Being able to access files and documents anywhere, teach remotely, able to seamlessly move between buildings, and being able to scale at will, are all necessities in today’s school environment. The cloud enables this.
- 7. Make life easier for yourself.** People in schools are too busy to have to contact an army of suppliers when something goes wrong. Having one business responsible for everything, relieves the pressure and avoids you being picked off with everyone blaming someone else.

The Legacy

Schools are changing and our education system with it. The Coronavirus pandemic has shown that Remote Learning is here to stay, and school staff have started to recognise the important role that technology can play in their roles. The key is to capitalise on where we are.

At the same time, budgets are not getting any bigger, so schools need to make technology work for them – to help bring efficiencies in how they operate – simply adding to what was there before is not sustainable.

“Technology will help us make life easier for teachers. It was not so long ago that we were all talking about the burdens from excessive teacher workloads. With some of the technology we now have we are able to give them a much better work-life balance, helping reduce the time spent on creating and sharing lesson plans, on setting work, and on marking what comes back”.

Eliza Hollis, Executive Headteacher

As well as efficiencies technology can also play a crucial role in making lessons more interactive, more engaging and embed better collaboration between pupils.

“Technology enables us to push our gifted children at the same time as look after those pupils who need more support such as those with visual impairments – it really does level up the playing field”.

Dan Lister, Chair of Governors



“What needs to be taught and what needs to be learnt are completely different things. It is like learning to drive – you are taught how to drive by an instructor, but you actually learn to drive once you have passed your test and go out on your own. It is the same in education – as teachers we teach children the skills they need, with technology there to support how they go on to learn and master those skills”.

Eliza Hollis, Executive Headteacher

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