



Why a Secondary School in Shropshire believes that introducing Microsoft Teams in school not only ensures a continuity of teaching, but also prepares pupils better for the workplace.

The Background

The Mary Webb School and Science College is a secondary school situated in a particularly beautiful location in the village of Pontesbury, just a few miles south of Shrewsbury, Shropshire, surrounded by hills and woodland. The catchment area is changing – whilst rural, there are many new houses and the infrastructure is being improved all the time.

As a relatively small community Secondary School of around 600 students (aged 11 to 16), the school has a proud history and a growing reputation for being a little bit special.

RM has been the school's technology partner for 15 years. When the school-employed engineer left, RM was asked to provide a fully Managed Service, but when the school decided to go back to having their own network manager, RM played a role in training the new engineer, before slipping more into the background as that person got up to speed.

"Whilst they may be in the background, RM are still there for me. The people I speak to know me, I know them, and they know our network. It works really well."

Ashley Morris, Network Manager



In the case of Mary Webb School, it was RM who demonstrated to the school Leadership Team how employing the school's own person to focus on the technology plan which would in turn drive new emerging technologies that would play a critical role in the direction of the school; whilst retaining someone like RM alongside them, ensuring that the school operated smoothly and efficiently, was the perfect model. It worked for Mary Webb School, and is possibly why the school was able to take the pandemic lockdown – when it came – in its stride.

Responding to the challenge

Building on this approach, the Mary Webb School were better prepared than many schools when the Prime Minister announced at the end of March 2020 that most children would have to be taught from home. The school were already using RM Unify for single log-on, OneDrive for file storage, had an Intranet and used Sharepoint for collaboration, used Portico, and staff had VPN remote access to all the necessary systems, and key staff had been trained how to use most of these applications.

"It was remote working rather than remote learning."

Ashley Morris, Network Manager

Whilst this set the school on the right path, when the pandemic hit, they had to respond quickly.

"Whilst moving everything to the cloud was on our radar, the virus brought everything forward – almost in an instant."

Ashley Morris, Network Manager

For some time the school had been encouraging teachers to engage more and more with technology. All staff had been trained to use Office 365, and like most schools, there were some staff who leapt at the opportunity – and others who were less keen. It was probably the arrival of a new Headteacher that really brought it to the fore – he was much more tech-savvy and had a clear understanding of the role of technology in a modern school.

Pre-lockdown the school were just dipping their toes into the world of Microsoft Teams, but it took maybe a day or two of the “new normal” before they realised that they just had to go for it. Fortunately the school had invested in the kind of hardware that made MS Teams so much easier to operate – laptops with faster processors and larger screens.

"Within a very short space of time every department was using MS Teams – both for file sharing and for communicating with each other. They needed very little prodding – they just got up and went with it."

Ashley Morris, Network Manager



Practical implications of remote learning

Naturally it wasn't all easy. One of the toughest challenges was one that may seem innocuous – taking laptops out of school. They were all “locked down” so that they would only work on the school network, and had to be re-programmed to work outside of the school. Accessing remote support was also a new experience for staff – with just one Network Manager on the end of a phone, they had to learn to do things for themselves – and not only that, they had to do it remotely. Fortunately these type of challenges fell away after a few weeks.

In these situations having someone you can rely on is critical, as it takes the pressure off a lone specialist worker in a school.

"I see RM as third-line support – they are my back-up when I don't know the answer. I have someone I can escalate things to. RM makes me look good."

Ashley Morris, Network Manager

Furthermore, a specialised technology partner – such as RM – can manage the more operational activities behind-the-scenes, freeing up the dedicated employee to focus on the higher profile and more strategic development work that they just would not be able to have the time to do, if they were dealing with everything else as well.

"RM are just there, anticipating issues before they become problems. Recently our anti-virus security software didn't run as planned – before I was even aware, RM called me to say they were on top of the problem and it was quickly fixed."

Ashley Morris, Network Manager

This all enabled the school Network Manager to focus on enhancing the schools technical offer – to invest in their website, in logos and design – generally putting the school in the best possible light.

"The tasks that a traditional school technical engineer would do are done for us by RM, leaving me to work on the future technology strategy for the school – albeit with plenty of helpful insight from the RM team."

Ashley Morris, Network Manager



One example of this is with connectivity.

"Because RM are a service provider they recognised that as we moved more things to the cloud, we would need a wider bandwidth to make this happen. It may not have been the first thing I had considered, but they were well ahead of me."

Ashley Morris, Network Manager

The school have now invested in a camera set to do live lessons from next term, and despite a few reservations most teachers are supportive. They have also used Q-Codes around the school as a way to get everyone to feel more technologically involved – “if you want to know how to make a video – go and look at the Q-Code”.

The Lessons Learnt

- **Do not penny pinch, as you may live to regret it.** Cheap PCs are cheap for a reason. Mary Webb School invested in higher spec devices pre-virus, and the benefit when the pandemic hit was multiplied – they could cope with the new software, with being able to operate remotely, and have the processing power to encourage staff to want to use them and not constantly hang as lower specified devices may have done.
- **Have someone to turn to, to remove a lot of the pressure.** Many schools have someone responsible for IT within a school. That is fine until things go wrong. In the case of Mary Webb School, they had made the decision to supplement their Network Manager with a Managed Service contract from RM – someone who was there when needed, but otherwise was in the background.
- **Technology can be intuitive.** You do not need to worry about whether people will recognise the benefits of good technology – whet people’s appetite and sit back and watch them run with it.
- **Keep one eye on the future.** You should always be planning what next – do not consider things in isolation – how will you build on it next time – don’t stop – don’t be complacent. Whilst no-one predicted the pandemic, by planning for other eventualities, you can be at least part-ready for whatever is thrown at you.

The Legacy

For 50 years schools have taught by rote. Overnight we have seen the biggest shift in a generation to how education is delivered. We now have a much more personal and individual approach – all brought about by our response to the pandemic.

"My biggest hope is that we see the lockdown as the catalyst to change – the greater use of technology in schools – and to a new way of teaching, and of learning. We have the chance to prepare our students better for the workplace – if they are accomplished using MS Teams in school, they will have no problem using it in their first job."

Ashley Morris, Network Manager

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