How a commitment to a robust IT strategy – built around G Suite – prepared a Secondary School in Hertfordshire for the Coronavirus lockdown and all that follows

The Background

Ashlyns School is a mixed Secondary and Sixth Form located in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire. The school has a wonderful history, having been established in 1935 as the final location of the Foundling Hospital – a children's charity, which started in London in 1739. The main Berkhamsted building is a beautiful example of neo-Georgian architecture and is Grade II listed. The school serves 1,400 students aged 11 to 18, as well as providing IT support to two local Primary Schools.

The school have a long-term relationship with RM as their technology partner, dating back over 15 years. This relationship continues to go from strength to strength as both parties remain committed to developing digital technology, ensuring the school has the infrastructure to push forward with student engagement. A good example of the mutual benefit of the partnership is the successful Account Management structure that is now in place.

Responding to the Challenge

Several years ago, Ashlyns School took the decision to move its technology to the cloud. Due to expansion the school was in a position to invest in the reliable core infrastructure required to support one to one blended learning. The school invested in a new ESXI cluster and high density wireless which enabled the investment in one to one devices.

In 2018, the school's digital leadership team sat down and set out a roadmap – putting RM Unify at the centre of the strategy for reliable (cloud-based) technologies. Critically – as they would soon discover – Google Classroom was installed right across the school. They set up an internal Working Party – made up of the Network Manager, IT Technician, the School's Senior Finance and Operations Manager, the Deputy Head, and a teacher who acted as a champion – to agree how best to do this. They also made the sensible decision to provide all staff with Chromebooks and invest in solid staff training.

> **"We gave all of our staff a Chromebook on the basis that we wanted them to get used to using them, and hence move away from any legacy software and applications they may have been previously been using. It also made my team's life easier, as everyone was now using the same type of device".**
>
> **Ben Marks,** Network Manager & Teacher of Computing

They went one step further in September 2019, launching a parental-contribution scheme to equip pupils in Year 7 with Chromebooks too. The school sourced the devices at a very competitive price, giving parents the choice to buy them outright or via a finance deal, and the school agreed to manage them. They had an incredible 96 percent take up in the first year.

As a result, when the pandemic arrived and the Prime Minister announced on 17th March that most pupils would need to be educated remotely, all of Ashlyn's School's Year 7s went home on that Friday , and come Monday morning opened their Chromebooks ready to work. The same was true for staff.

As an example of why this strategic approach was so important, Ashlyns School also made the decision to invest in an application that would work with their on premise MIS (SIMS), which would enable their staff to access it remotely. As a result, when lockdown came, they could do almost everything from home.

Practical Implications of Remote Learning

Whilst things were relatively straightforward for the Year 7s, those elsewhere in the school faced a few more challenges – not everyone had a device they could use and many had challenging home environments with limited internet connectivity. In these cases, the school responded by lending out many of the Chromebooks that they had previously used for classroom teaching, and also set up "hubs" that pupils attend in school to get online.

That said, all pupils in the school (not just Year 7s) had been doing their homework on Google Classroom for a couple of years; as such, they were accustomed to logging in via RM Unify and quickly navigating themselves around the Google Classroom application.

One thing that Ashlyns School didn't do, was rush into using video. It was around six weeks into lockdown before they felt they were ready – once a robust policy had been put in place and appropriate training had been provided – they rolled out Google Meet to all teachers as a way to record interactive lessons by video.

> **"The project was an integral part of the School's Improvement Plan. This ensured all staff understood the direction that we were moving in and allowed us to allocate resource to ensure its success."**
>
> **James Shapland,** Network Headteacher

The decision to move to G Suite was largely based on an internal view that Google was, on balance, a better operating system for what the school needed to do. The IT Team were pro-Google and it proved much easier to install and to manage.

> **"We didn't choose Google because we knew the pandemic was coming, but we were very glad that we did! When twinned with a Chromebook, it just works".**
>
> **Ben Marks,** Network Manager & Teacher of Computing

At the start of 2020, RM undertook research that suggested that many teachers were reluctant to embrace technology in the classroom. Whether that was true or not at Ashlyns School beforehand, it certainly is not the case today.

> **"Many teachers have discovered that the technology can be really beneficial – I certainly hope they will be more willing to try new things in the future".**
>
> **Ben Marks,** Network Manager & Teacher of Computing

Another early decision, which paid off for Ashlyns School was in investing in a technology partner – in their case, RM. Whilst the school are fortunate enough to have three of their own technicians on site, having someone that they know they can turn to – and be available at the end of the phone – takes a lot of pressure off. What is more, the RM first line support have the knowledge and the approach to be able to deal with most things on the first call. However, if they do need to refer matters, they are sufficiently skilled to seamlessly pass issues to more technical colleagues, without losing the thread – something that is not always the case with every technology partner.

> **"To be honest, there are times when RM have not been the cheapest, but you get what you pay for, and I know that when the team select RM for something, it will get done and to me that's excellent value for money".**
>
> **Andrea West,** Senior Finance and Operations Manager

One of the key considerations for Ashlyns School, has been the choice of Account Manager – someone who represents the school within RM and with whom they school can build a relationship with – someone who really understands the school and its idiosyncrasies, whilst also acting as a type of translation service – applying corporate directives to local situations.

> **"It is a genuine two-way relationship. It is why we keep coming back".**
>
> **Ben Marks,** Network Manager & Teacher of Computing

The Lessons Learnt

1. **Develop an IT strategy for your school.** Whether you like it or not, technology is all around us. Having a clear IT strategy up-front allows you to make decisions which can be costed and planned for and stand the test of time.

2. **Cloud is the future (if not the present).** If the last four months have taught us anything, it is that being able to access systems and deliver lessons remotely is essential. All schools should be building their journey to the cloud strategy, if they are not there already.

3. **Do not forget the training.** Whilst Ashlyns School were successful in securing INSET time to train staff in their technology products, they had to justify why they needed it - and the time they had was never enough. All schools should ensure that technology training features highly within this precious resource.

4. **Choose the right technology partner and ensure you have a great Account Manager.** For Ashlyns School this was the foundation stone that enabled them to be successful – the way to do this is to build a solid relationship between both parties. Ashlyns are the first to volunteer to be a pilot site for RM, and as a result, get the first bite of anything new.

The Legacy

There has to be some good that comes from the pandemic and the lockdown that came with it. That may be as simple as an acknowledgment that technology has become an established part of how schools now operate.

This was already established at Ashlyns School – and homework will continue to be undertaken through Google Classroom – it already was and it will remain that way. Where a new impetus may come – is through one-to-one devices for all. When every child has their own Chromebook things will accelerate. It won't happen overnight, but it is definitely part of their future.

"With hindsight you could say we were lucky, but the reality is that this was a textbook example of why having a clear strategy and a roadmap, makes sense".

Heather Jones, Deputy Headteacher

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