



**'Never too old to learn' – how
a 10-school Trust is embracing
the technology made available
during the pandemic**

The background

Situated in Kingston Upon Hull, East Yorkshire, The Constellation Trust is a locally based Trust for children aged from 3 to 18 years, with strong links with the University of Hull. Whilst relatively small, this has been a fast-growing Trust where all of its ten schools – whether they are judged to be outstanding or need some support – have each benefitted from the shared opportunities that being part of a Trust offers.

The Trust is made up of seven Primaries, two Secondaries, and an Alternative Provision School. With a strong, proven track record of working with schools facing challenging circumstances, in the four years the Trust has existed it has achieved outstanding outcomes, overcoming a number of hurdles – not least the high levels of social deprivation that existed in and around this part of the country.

The Trust prides itself having developed the infrastructure necessary to provide the capacity to offer the level of support any of its schools may want or need, believing passionately in providing great learning opportunities for all members of its community. A key part of that infrastructure is technology, selecting RM as its IT Managed Services partner, following a public procurement exercise shortly after its formation in 2017.

"In January 2017 we met with all of the 'market leaders' who could provide the services we needed as part of the tender process and shortlisted two, including RM. Most of the other providers wanted us to return to a vanilla network, but with 1,500 pupils to consider – and just one 6-week summer break to complete the work – this was clearly a concern".

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

Working with a managed service provider

It is four years since RM were appointed into this important role, but the criteria that led the Trust to making that decision are as important now as they were then.

"It comes down to three things – reliability, quality and value for money – and the relationship with RM continues to tick all three of those boxes".

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer



Choosing a technology partner is not like selecting a commodity provider. You need someone who provides you the level of flexibility that you require, is able to respond to the changing needs of your schools and Trust but can do all this for a cost that you can afford – and can budget for.

“Back in 2017 we wanted a bespoke service and RM were able to offer this. They were very accommodating in helping to shape the ideal “Flex” solution for us”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer



Importantly, there is intrinsic value in having someone who “just gets it” – an organisation that works with schools and trusts on a daily basis, has a direct line into the industry specialists in Microsoft and Google, and has one finger on the pulse of where education technology is heading.

“With RM we have got to the point where IT just works”. There is the absolute minimal downtime as a result of the occasional essential maintenance reboot”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer



On its inception, the Constellation Trust set out a clear technology vision, and quickly brought RM into that thinking – getting their endorsement whilst evolving the plans in light of their broader insight. This started with a move towards a consistent ICT across all of their sites – based around the RM Unify, Microsoft Office 365 and SharePoint platforms as the standard suite for all schools.

Next, they moved their software and services to the Cloud with the help of RM’s Technical Account Manager – spending six months preparing and six months implementing it successfully, with training and getting to a position where they felt comfortable that their staff were accustomed with it.

“RM’s implementation and project management capabilities differ from the skillsets that we have in a school. I can take it part of the way, but I am aware of my limits and when I need specialists. Originally a teacher, my role has evolved through pragmatic need, and by working with RM, we each play to our strengths in a complementary way”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

An initial building block – that has reaped its reward many times over in the last twelve months of lockdown – has been the implementation of RM Unify as the single portal for everything that a pupil (or staff member) will need. The benefits of single sign-on are enormous (if you think about all the individual logins that you would need without it), coupled with the efficiencies of a single portal with all the tiles for each application neatly laid out on one screen.

“When lockdown came it was all hands on deck – the fact that we already had RM Unify in place, with staff and pupils accustomed to using it – definitely made one thing easier than it may otherwise have been”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

Coping with the pandemic, and coming out the other side

Nobody predicted the Coronavirus, and no-one could be prepared for what it would mean to schools – the need to equip pupils with a way to continue their education, whilst supporting teachers and all education staff with the ability to continue to perform their role – from home and/or in a different way than they were used to.

“We expected Lockdown would last 3 months, but a year on and we are still having to adjust. But we have learnt so much in that time, and whilst change is never easy there have been benefits that have forced people to work smarter. We now need to include those benefits in our everyday working lives”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

The Constellation Trust has benefited from the [laptop provision exercise conducted by the Department for Education](#), as a way to get modern, reliable devices into the hands of their students – especially those that came from homes where a digital divide existed either because of lack of devices or poor connectivity, without a computer of their own, who may have been relying on a PlayStation games console, a mobile phone or where a family was sharing one device between three children, mum and dad. The Trust have also invested in Microsoft InTune as a way to manage these devices – both the Trust-owned ones and those provided by the DfE – recognising that without something like this it would be almost impossible to keep track of all the new devices coming into (and going out of) each school.

“MS InTune is the route to a more sustainable IT strategy. It enables us to extend our computing estate, bringing in new – cheaper – devices to operate alongside more expensive equipment”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

Whilst the Trust had started looking at MS Teams before the pandemic, it quickly moved from “an enquiring interest” to a “wholesale roll out”.

“Microsoft Teams was rolled out with lightning speed – quite literally overnight. The ability to connect to every child and member of staff (and parents) was suddenly amazing. Teachers not only had to deal with the logistics of Teams but the concept of a new media to deliver via an existing pedagogy. Not only was it about online lessons but imaginative and creative use of the technology to produce engaging lessons that continued to lead to successful outcomes ensuring a balance through blended learning of just the right amount of each”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

This demonstrates the importance of training going beyond just how the software works – but how to make an online lesson engaging, and how to get the most out of the technology. It also suggests a need to revisit school pedagogies to ensure that they keep up with the digital age.

“It will be interesting to see how examination boards respond post-pandemic – it may well be that there will be trials of online examinations, more online assessments using technology, and digital portfolios. The fact is that the pandemic has opened up a conversation about how we can now communicate, teach, and assess. Embracing all of this could provide for a very exciting time to be at the cutting edge of education development.”

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

Now that almost all pupils have returned to school, technology has an important role to play in the “new normal” – both in supporting the continued impact of the pandemic “bubbled groups”, but teaching continued using the systems and knowledge developed during lockdown), as well as looking at new ways to use this technology – from better parental engagement to collaboration between students on school assignments.

“Just about every student will go into a job that uses technology. Schools have a role to play in preparing them for that, which could potentially lead to a contemporary curriculum review across all phases of education that is truly inclusive of real time digital technologies”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

What is apparent – however – is that people are increasingly recognising the importance of technology within an education setting.

“The pandemic has led to an increased interest in IT by Senior Leaders because it is now a tool that needs to be deployed at a moment’s notice – especially if “bubbling” and local lockdowns continue to occur”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer



However, technology cannot be considered in isolation – it is central to the entire school (and Trust) strategy, and it is important that other activities embrace it – whether that is rewriting your safeguarding policy, equipping staff with the training needed to make the most of a new piece of software, or assessing how it can embrace communication with parents, teachers and governors.

“When we ran the tender in 2017, I was adamant that we had to have a consistent infrastructure across the Trust – both to improve communication and collaboration between schools – as well as to share resources and ideas. Consistency makes a big difference when you want to do something at a Trust-wide level. It leads to an increased positive impact in teaching and learning and will help raise attainment, as well as make it easier for a student to transition from Primary to Secondary school, which in turn helps to raise literacy levels”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

The challenge is that not all schools and trusts think this way, and whilst Constellation Trust were ahead of the game – planning for it some time ago – there are instances where a failure to consider the full impact, can still catch you out.

“We now have 950 new devices across the Trust. But we do not have 950 new power sockets – where is everyone going to plug in their device to charge it”?

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer



The lessons learnt

1. **Start with a vision.** Without a goal, there is a lack of clarity on the direction you should go, and decision making is compromised if every small task is revisited many times over.
2. **You cannot have a strategy that ignores technology.** Whilst this may have been possible once, technology has a role to play in everything we do, and it is imperative that everyone in every job thinks about how technology impacts them (and how they impact technology).

"Pupils want a lesson that is engaging, both visually and with text, video and audio. Lessons need to engage the pupils as well as educate them".

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer



3. **Don't try to do it on your own.** A teacher's life is tough enough, without burdening them with project managing a new network transition or ask them to train colleagues on the latest software development. Reach out to the professionals and trust them to be your valued partner.

"Teachers have enough to do without having to worry about the technology being reliable. The value of being able to take that worry away has been priceless".

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer



4. **Be positive.** After all that the world has been through in the last 12 months, you could be excused to be a little downhearted, but do not be – schools are now in a much better position than they have been for some time – with Government commitments to increased funding, new capabilities within schools, backed by a desire to want to leap forward. The challenge now is to harness all of this.
5. **Never give up.** The level of resilience in our schools and trusts has been incredible. Pupils, teachers, Leadership Teams, Governors, parents – everyone has embraced the challenges and found new ways to do things. This mentality will position us well for whatever the next hurdle is.

The legacy

It is clear that too much has been gained over the year of the pandemic to permit schools and teachers to be allowed to retrench to their old way of doing things. In the case of the Constellation Trust, they are committed to completing their vision of being a fully cloud-based, server-less, technology-first trust.

“We would not have received this level of investment if it was not for the pandemic – it is critical that we make the most of it. We need others to come with us – parent evenings are better online, as are meetings, and we can now connect and teach remotely when a student cannot get to school”.

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

And it need not end there. Technology enables you to enrich learning in ways that we would never have thought possible before. Just think of all those chemistry experiments that many of us did when we were at school, but health and safety now prohibits – technology permits us to repeat those in a much safer, controlled environment (such as online).

"We must never close our thinking to how we can benefit and the ways we can be taught – we are never too old to learn. Change is maybe not as painful as we would have thought 12 months ago yet the benefits can be life changing".

Trevor Taylor, Chief Operating Officer

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