Why one of the UK's largest Academy Trusts chose to replace their computer backup solution, and the lessons they would pass on

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The background

Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) is a family of schools across the UK that is committed to delivering an excellent education that launches all children in their care towards a remarkable life. It is their deeply held belief that every child has something remarkable to offer and they see it as their duty to help each and every child find that within themselves.

Comprising 57 schools split across 60 sites the length and breadth of the country – from Hull and Middlesbrough in the north to Torquay on the south coast – in inner cities and rural locations – ranging from 40 students to almost 2,000 per establishment – covering Special, Primary and Secondary education.

Not surprisingly, their IT infrastructures have been quite varied – with some at the leading edge and others clearly requiring work to get them up to a common level of provision. The good news is that the senior leadership team recognised that technology is an important component within a successful school trust today, forming a central tenet of their strategy.

The Trust's key IT relationship is with the technology partner, RM, and has been for several years, and whilst their role has changed over the years, AET increasingly sees RM as its solutions provider.

> **"We see RM as a critical friend – someone to give us that extra bit of help when it comes to large scale projects and initiatives – calling on the breadth and depth of their experience as a long-term technology provider to the education sector".**
>
> **Martin Simpson,** Head of IT, AET

The technology vision

AET epitomises what is best about being part of a large multi-academy trust. They have a clear vision of what they want for their students, with a strategy and a roadmap of how to deliver it. Importantly they recognise that technology has a big role to play in turning this into reality.

> **"We want the very best for our students and are really ambitious for them. To realise that ambition we need to give them as level a playing field as possible – from access to quality devices, a reliable and safe network, and the very best online resources. We don't let the fact that a school is in a rural location in Lincolnshire give them any less opportunities than someone in Inner London".**
>
> **Martin Simpson,** Head of IT, AET

Standardisation is important. Most students are issued with a common device that they all know, understand and can exploit to its fullest capability – either a ChromeBook or an iPad. This means that teachers can set some truly ambitious project work in the knowledge that a talented student – no matter what their background – can work on it remotely and really push themselves.

> **"Technology has a big part to play in our strategy".**
>
> Martin Simpson, Head of IT, AET

Like most sectors of society, the pandemic was a proof point for how the Trust looked to technology. Whilst at AET the vision was already there, the lockdowns made them sharpen the focus. As an example, like many schools and trusts, the team at AET sent a letter home asking parents whether their children had access to a device. What they didn't realise was that that was the wrong question, in that whilst many families had a device, that was all they had – one device between multiple siblings (and possibly two parents too).

> **"Lockdown brought it home to us that we had a duty to ensure children could access their education in the same way as one another – no matter what devices they already had in the home or whether they had a reliable broadband line".**
>
> Martin Simpson, Head of IT, AET

But it is not just students – it is teachers too. Fortunately, AET has always been forward focused with IT, with a talented digital team taking a leadership role in championing the way that technology is used within teaching and learning across the Trust. Google Classroom and Google Workspace were being used long before the pandemic hit, demonstrating that the years of groundwork by the Trust paid off when it was most needed.

> **"We are in a great position in that we had – and continue to have – buy-in at the very top from the trustees down. All are fully committed to this technology-led strategy – and let's be clear – this was a multi-million-pound commitment".**
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> Martin Simpson, Head of IT, AET

Reliable infrastructure, security and IT backups

As a common principle, IT backups are rarely top of mind for many people – least of all teachers and school staff – it is something that they just assume happens. It is something that is very important, but not something that is discussed regularly, or that people spend too much time worrying about on a day-to-day basis. That is, until something goes wrong.

> "Backup is something I would put pretty high up in terms of priorities, but it is not something I would want my IT technicians – and certainly not headteachers – worrying whether it ran last night".
>
> **Martin Simpson**, Head of IT, AET

AET has recently changed their backup solution. Like many school trusts, they had many disparate backup systems running across their schools – some that had been in place for many years, some that were new, some that worked well, some less so, some that needed user intervention, others that ran automatically, some that backed-up on premise, others to the cloud.

> "One day I mapped it all out and realised that if someone asked me if all our data was protected the way it should be, I wouldn't have a good answer for them".
>
> **Martin Simpson**, Head of IT, AET

This made them realise that they needed one system – across all their schools – no matter what shape or size that school was, and no matter what they had on site – AET operates 57 different networks, so this was no mean feat. None of the existing solutions they had could do that.

> "The reason we chose Redstor was that it's incredibly easy to set up and deploy... it is completely cloud-based so we can monitor it from anywhere... there is no on-premise hardware required, which is hugely helpful for us, as some of our schools only get a visit from a technician every couple of weeks. It scales well, so we only pay for what we are using. It is very well established. And critically, it came with a recommendation from RM, which was very important to us".
>
> **Martin Simpson**, Head of IT, AET

Cost is an important issue in any school right now, and whilst Redstor is not the cheapest option, it can be very cost effective for a larger trust like AET. The smaller schools in their family were not hit with a heavy capital cost, whilst the bigger schools got to benefit from a significant enterprise-level backup solution. No-one lost out.

Implementation has gone well, as a result of Redstor's simple deployment approach. AET did not have the time – nor the inclination – for a lot of downtime as new software or hardware was installed.

> "RM did most of the work for us remotely – which was great. We probably spent more time decommissioning old tape drives and backup servers, than setting up the new Redstor system. We can now deploy additional set-ups on the new system at the flick of a switch remotely, with no on-site intervention".
>
> **Martin Simpson**, Head of IT, AET

Sharing best practice

1. **Be clear on what you want –** Redstor works best when you have a complex network to cover. If you are a simple, traditional, single-site school, there may be cheaper options. But if you have a complicated set-up, with multiple establishments, it really comes into its own.

2. **Put a price on your time –** in preparing your business case, do not under-estimate how much a solution like Redstor will save you. It cuts out all the management overhead that you may be carrying with your disparate solutions today. Not to mention the peace of mind of knowing that it just works.

3. **Listen to others –** whilst this is not something people think about every day, it is an important decision. Do talk to other schools and trusts, and do listen to IT professionals – such as RM – who can provide impartial advice on the best solution for your individual set-up.

The future

Every trust needs a clear technology strategy. That strategy manifests itself with reliable hardware devices that run engaging and collaborative software packages over fast and stable connectivity networks. But to be a good strategy it needs to justify how technology informs teaching and learning, with a clear roadmap for the future, and it needs to cover the essential building blocks such as training teachers to get the most from it. Above all, it needs to be safe and secure, so that the things that few people worry about – such as running computer backups – just happen.

AET is exemplar in their clear technology strategy that makes sense, and everyone buys into. It proved itself during the pandemic, and for the children it cares for, it enhances their lives every day since. Behind the scenes is an impressive team of technicians who ensure that things just work.

The future is uncertain, but AET is well positioned to drive its own destiny, as opposed to being restricted by it. One area that most agree will become an increasing headache for all is cyber security – something the DfE (and others) are shining a spotlight on right now with their new standards – and quite rightly, given that the education sector has been identified as the sector of society prone to the most phishing and cyber attacks each year. The role backup plays within a trust-wide cyber security strategy is important, and that is likely to be a focus for senior leaders at AET and across our academy system in the months and years ahead.

"Where Redstor excels is in supporting a huge number of scenarios, and that is where it pays for itself – both in management fees but also in the time it saves".

Martin Simpson, Head of IT, AET

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