

Case Study



Syplex delivers cost-effective enhanced ITC at CCSS

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Paul Redhead – Principal, CCSS

Introduction

Cambridge Centre for Sixth-form Studies (CCSS) is one of the UK's leading independent sixth-form colleges, specialising in A-level and GCSE courses. CCSS is two-thirds residential, one-third day, and caters for 170 students from the UK and overseas. It occupies three teaching sites in Cambridge, plus seven further buildings occupied by boarders, and has over 70 staff working in teaching, administration and student accommodation. As a Charitable Educational Trust, CCSS has to ensure that the fees paid by students' families are wisely spent, so locating a cost-effective supplier was paramount when the Trustees took the decision to upgrade the College's IT and data communications infrastructure in 2003.

The Challenge

CCSS spent some time defining its Information Technology and Communications (ITC) objectives prior to evaluating suitable suppliers, as its Principal, Paul Redhead, explained:

"Staff and students these days have very high expectations of ITC, plus we had the added complexity of operating from several separate buildings, so we knew we needed to fully understand the challenges we faced before we could select a supplier to work with us. Above all, we needed a reliable system that we could use internally as an effective IT tool, so we drew up a wish-list that would meet the objectives of all the parties concerned. It was imperative that staff and students had easy access to the network, regardless of where they were located in the College buildings. Our internal administration had to benefit significantly from the new system, and we also wanted in the longer-term to establish and maintain a virtual library of learning resources. We also have an obligation to ensure that the system is secure, both internally and externally, and that it can be readily administered and maintained."

Paul Redhead was introduced to Syplex Ltd through the Cambridge Network (which, amongst other services, facilitates contacts between Cambridge-based businesses and academic institutions). In a competitive bid, the company was selected as the preferred supplier to CCSS after they presented a detailed evaluation of the College's ITC infrastructure and made recommendations on the upgrade options. In addition to their technical expertise, Paul Redhead also approved of the way in which Syplex was willing to fit in with the needs of CCSS staff:

"Their flexibility was exceptional, as was their willingness to listen to us. Many companies would have tried to impose a 'perfect' solution on us, but - primarily because of budget constraints - we had to be pragmatic and occasionally to compromise. Syplex fully understood and empathised with this, and we could clearly see why other companies that had used them in the past had spoken so warmly of them."

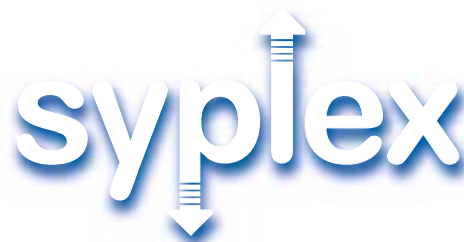


Key Features:

- 3 separate learning centres to link with a cost-effective ITC solution
- Mixture of cabled networks and wireless to accommodate local building constraints
- Private DSL wide area network
- Windows 2003 Server, Windows XP, Active Directory, Exchange and Sharepoint Portal Server
- Total package of specification, supply, implementation and ongoing support



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Simon Foote of Syplex recalled the main challenges:

Paul Redhead had admitted that he and his colleagues were bewildered by the range of options open to them, and also of the potential costs of a current ITC solution, so we had to be very specific in our recommendations and our justification of them. The CCSS legacy system of LAN, dial-up modems, ISDN, ADSL, NT4 servers and Windows software gave us a basis for moving forwards, but we had to ensure that the new solution gave them good system performance in a highly distributed environment. We needed to specify something really cost-effective that would not duplicate systems in the key sites but that would still make the IT system available from multiple locations. We also had the constraint that some of the College buildings could not have fixed cabling installed, so our expertise in Wireless LANs was an advantage when it came to assessing options for CCSS. Another requirement was that any solution we proposed had to be a minimal overhead for the college after installation.

The Solution

Fortunately, Syplex determined that the typical CCSS user had a fairly light usage pattern, so it was feasible to recommend developing centralised services together with a core WAN infrastructure (using G.SHDSL over private BT circuits) supporting the three teaching locations. Where possible services were provided via web-enabled technologies to reduce network load and to make most efficient use of WAN bandwidth.

Access from additional locations can be provided by Internet based links (using VPNs), giving them near-identical services to those available in the core locations. A combination of CAT5 cabling and wireless technologies (using Cisco Aironet Access Points) were used, the latter to overcome cabling restrictions and where maximum network bandwidth was less critical. Syplex commissioned and managed the cabling contractors, who had to operate in a tight timescale to complete the installation before the start of a new academic term.

The NT4 servers that had been running domains for teaching staff, students and administrative staff, and for e-mail via ADSL, were replaced with rack mounted Dell servers running Windows 2003, with domains migrated to Active Directory, and Exchange 2003 for email.

The Benefits

Paul Redhead is very satisfied with the Syplex solution:

"Our initial focus has been to ensure that everyone is comfortable with electronic communications, and the new e-mail capabilities have already transformed the way in which we work throughout the College. We also feel far more secure with the centrally synchronised anti-virus and firewall capabilities than we did with our old system of standalone machines that were vulnerable to infection."

"Our old system had been a heavy overhead for our IT staff in terms of maintenance and administration, as each machine was individually configured - but the Syplex solution has transformed all that. The combination of the Windows 2003 Server and XP means that our systems administrators can undertake automated PC installation and desktop management (including automatic repairs and upgrades). They can also see exactly what is happening anywhere in the system from the main server room. Given that we operate over several split sites up to ten minutes' travelling time apart that has made an enormous difference in how we respond to any issues."

"The students also have reliable, fast Internet access and e-mail from any of our teaching sites, and they have been empowered to use the Web and e-mail for a wide range of access purposes and not just for learning. That's an important part of our mission to give them wider life skills, and we trust them not to abuse the system. We do keep web logs of who accesses which sites, and so far our trust has been fully justified."

CCSS have taken up Syplex's ongoing support package and Paul Redhead is, once again, highly complimentary about the company:

"They gave us the ultimate in flexible working arrangements on the maintenance side. Basically, we do what we can at this end, and we can call them in on guaranteed response times if we need more expert help. They fitted in completely with our requirements on this, just as they did on the implementation as a whole, and the arrangement is proving extraordinarily useful to our systems personnel whose time is now being used much more profitably."

For the future, CCSS is planning to build an Intranet or 'Virtual Library' of information for staff and students that can be updated regularly by staff using MS Sharepoint server. This provides a document library accessible via standard MS Office applications, and via an Intranet Portal page, so staff will not need to learn programming or HTML skills. Students have also asked for out-of-hours Web and e-mail access at their lodgings.

Paul Redhead readily admits that Syplex proved to be a wise choice:

"Having a company like Syplex on board has to be infinitely preferable to the strains of attempting a DIY solution. They managed everything from start to finish, within tight deadlines and timescales, plus they fitted in seamlessly with our in-house team and handled the inevitable hassles with humour and dedication. Everything they have given us works well, but this is just Phase 1 of an ongoing project so the next challenge is to ensure that it is all used to its maximum potential for the benefit of the entire College community. Then, we will move on to the next stage - with Syplex's help."

For further details on how Syplex Ltd can help you achieve your IT objectives:

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