The Grimsby Institute Group: Making it easy for students to use their own devices to learn

Summary

The Grimsby Institute wanted to create an infrastructure that would enable staff and students to use more mobile technology to enhance learning. They have improved the wifi connectivity in college and streamlined the software used to access college areas, as well as encouraging individuals to use their own technology. So far this has had a positive impact on retention and simplified the support that the college needs to provide, as well as saving the organisation money through some strategic changes.

About The Grimsby Institute Group

The Grimsby Institute Group (GIG) is one of the East Coast's largest providers of Further and Higher education. The group comprises of the Grimsby Institute, University Centre Grimsby (UCG), and Yorkshire Coast College in Scarborough and Lincolnshire Regional College in Skegness. They aim to put learners first, and deliver excellent and accessible high-quality training and education, always focusing on the raising of standards, meeting learner need and ensuring their success by being inspiring, creative and innovative in everything they do.

The challenge

The current financial and economic climate is affecting the decision making process at the Grimsby Institute Group, especially in relation to justifying the purchase of new and replacement technology. The Grimsby Institute Group had already moved from a 3-year replacement cycle for PCs to 5-years. They were also exploring the option of making this even longer and investigating additional or alternative strategies to manage the fast pace of technological change. Additionally, there were limited options, infrastructure and processes in place for students to use their own technology within the organisation.
The activity

A large part of the project was to ensure that the wireless coverage within the organisation could support and sustain the use of many personal and mobile devices. In the summer of 2010, the Trapeze wireless system was installed at the 3 main college sites with a total of 140 access points – each allowing 15 individuals to connect at any one time, load balanced with no global limit. An additional 70 points were installed over the summer in 2011 to improve the network further. To spread the reach further, older technology was relocated to community venues, where feasible. The number of fixed classroom computers has been complimented with laptop trolleys, which have been purchased to open the opportunity for more flexible learning spaces.

Staff and students have been encouraged to BYOT (bring your own technology) rather than blocking their use. The SonicWall system has been introduced, enabling students to access their college drives, via a segregated wifi network, through their Android, Apple or Windows driven mobile devices, which helps reduce duplication of files being created and used. For staff access to college areas, The Grimsby Institute Group moved from Citrix to 2X cloud computing software, which is a cheaper but just as reliable option, especially now there are both iPhone/iPad and Android apps and Thin Client operating systems. They have 2X installed on 3 load-balanced servers which have the capacity for 450-500 concurrent users accessing all college software.

Image 1 – SonicWall file shares
Additionally, the college’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Moodle has been modified to detect mobile devices and reflow information accordingly to allow access to the VLE from smartphones.

The Grimsby Institute Group have managed the issue of software licences by using software metering that stops access once the number of licences available has been reached at any one time. However, they have purchased additional licences for some key software exclusively for the 2X environment.

In relation to providing technology for individuals, they currently have several processes in place to support and encourage extended use. For staff they have an ‘assisted purchase’ route to help with the initial cost, whereby the college pay and then individuals pay this back, usually automatically out of their wages. For Higher Education students, part of their bursary is being used to provide individuals with their own netbook. There is also a small amount of technology available to borrow from the college library.

**The outcomes**

- At least 80% of the college is covered by wifi connectivity.
- A move to simpler access systems, regardless of device, is streamlining the support the college needs to provide.
- The college is saving money through cheaper client / access options. The college will save further money as less replacement technology is required / purchased.
- ILT Strategy has been restructured to reflect the major changes to teaching and learning culture and technological access.
The impact

Barry Clarkson, Director of ICT said, “The old system was not working, as students would often be sat in front of a computer surfing the web on their own mobile device! The newer way is better because it is encouraging them to use the technology they are more confident with because they are in contact with it daily, resulting in them not having to switch from one device to another.” In relation to mobile technology which is being used to enhance learning, Barry added, “some tutors were allowing students to use Twitter in class to ask questions, which was helping learners who were less confident to interact in the classroom and ‘ask’ questions when they were unsure about something.”

The lessons learned

The risk of compromising the integrity of the college network through so many devices accessing it is minimised because the student network is ring-fenced, meaning that they are not actually accessing the main college network and systems directly.

Two key elements that Barry Clarkson highlighted not to under-estimate were both:

- The power of conducting a detailed wifi survey before installing access points.
- The students’ existing knowledge of and confidence in using mobile technology through familiarity and daily contact.

Barry also pointed out “the importance of looking around for the best and most suitable options, focusing on the potential longevity of products and solutions, and that the 2X system can be trialled free for 5 users to check appropriateness and suitability for different organisations, and enable a business case for change to be generated.”

The Grimsby Institute has built sustainability into the annual business planning cycle and already has the following plans for the future:

- Application Jukebox is to be considered to stream applications more efficiently and effectively to mobile devices because it only transfers the required elements, not the whole product.
- The Library is investigating the possibility of overnight (or longer) loan of technology to individuals without mobile devices of their own.
- They are investigating the feasibility of extending the staff ‘assisted purchase’ programme to students too.

www.jiscrsc.ac.uk/case-studies
Useful links

The Grimsby Institute Group
2X Cloud Computing Software
SonicWALL® Mobile Connect™
Juniper Networks Trapeze Wireless Technology

Disclaimer
Jisc Regional Support Centres work with more than 2,000 UK learning providers helping them to improve performance and efficiency through the use of technology. Case studies may refer to specific products, processes or services. Such references are examples and are not endorsements or recommendations and should not be used for product endorsement purposes.