Case study: Southampton City College

How the Jisc certificate service makes securing web services more efficient

As a budget-conscious Further Education (FE) college with about 5,000 students and 400 staff, Southampton City College needs SSL certificates to provide encryption and assurance for a series of user-facing web services – including a staff intranet, the Shibboleth identity service, Outlook Web App, and eduroam.

But having used commercial SSL certificate providers in the past, IT support manager Andy May had found that the process of buying them was time-consuming, inefficient and far from cost-effective.

“You would order your certificate, and they would then ring the college to find out who you are – a long-winded process,” he says. “We were buying them individually – and some weren’t exactly cheap, if I’m honest.”

Nor were they particularly easy to manage once the college had bought them: other organisations were not sending email notifications to let the college know that a certificate was about to expire.

The solution: certificate service from Jisc

Then, two years ago, Southampton City College received a visit from a Jisc account manager. As a result of the visit, the college signed up for the Janet certificate service – which went on to become the Jisc certificate service in May 2015.

The service gives Southampton City College access to a portal through which it can buy competitively priced SSL certificates within minutes, and then manage them online – helping safeguard the college’s reputation, maintain integrity and keep confidential data safe.

Peace of mind for the college

A major benefit for Southampton City College, says May, is the assurance that comes from having a certificate service managed by Jisc.

“If there’s going to be a security breach,” he says, “it’s me who’s got to answer to the board. I know Jisc aren’t going to cut corners.”

The college combines use of the certificates with extensive internal training to make sure staff and students check the browser address bar before visiting web services, May says. “They can click on that certificate, and see it’s a legitimate certificate from Southampton City College,” he says. “I’m 100% sure that the certificates are doing what they should be doing,” he adds.
Quick, simple and easy to use
May has also found the Jisc certificate service to be quick, simple and easy to work with.

After originally signing up to the Janet certificate service, he says, the call offering access to the portal came within a couple of days. "It was a very, very simple process," he says.

With access to the portal arranged, all May then had to do was buy a bundle of certificate credits. "We buy a bundle of five or ten credits which are valid for 24 months. That way, we've got some 'in the bank' if we need one – if we want to spin up a server, we can do, and I don't have to go back to the director and say: 'We need to raise an order.'"

When it comes to converting the credits into certificates, he says, the process is "almost instant".

"At the moment we're migrating to a new server: I ordered a new certificate, and by the time I walked into the next office, we'd had an email to say it was available.

"If anybody can give a better service than that, then hats off to them – I don't think anybody can."

Making life even easier, May also receives email notifications when certificates are about to expire. "You can see it [on the portal], and you can get a notification when it's about to run out. It's that little reminder."

A cost-effective service
When the Janet certificate service switched over to the Jisc certificate service, that meant Southampton City College was no longer getting its certificates for free. So how does May feel that Jisc compares to other providers?

"Budgets are always tight," he says. "If you can save £10, £20, £50, that will go towards something else. But we still felt that the Jisc offering was the best in terms of cost."

And that trust in Jisc was rewarded when, shortly after the Heartbleed vulnerability was detected in OpenSSL, Jisc announced it was offering replacement SSL certificates at no charge.

"If that was a commercial provider, they'd say: 'That'll cost you another certificate,'” says May.

And the fact that the Jisc certificate service is just one of a portfolio of Jisc services that Southampton City College uses – including eduroam and a Janet connection – makes the decision even easier.

"We've seen the power of what Janet and Jisc can do. If someone says I could do a certificate for £1, I would still stick with Jisc."