Case study: Jisc web filtering framework

How West Suffolk College found cost-effective web filtering software quickly and easily – using the Jisc web filtering framework

The challenge: cost-effective compliance
With 11,000 students ranging from 14-16-year-olds to adults, West Suffolk College in Bury St Edmunds caters for a wide range of learning needs.

Instant internet access is a key part of meeting those needs – so the college must provide effective content filtering, in order to comply with its duties to safeguard students, including the counter-terrorist Prevent duty (http://bit.ly/Prevent_duty_guidance).

The challenge for the college, according to IT services manager Scott Gerber, was to find a cost-effective web filtering solution it could manage itself – while improving services and meeting goals on quality and compliance.

Yet as ever with large IT projects, making the decision on which product or vendor to choose can be difficult – not to mention time-consuming.

“"When you’re making a procurement,” says Gerber, “it’s a lot of money over a set period of time. Unless it’s failing dismally or isn’t up to spec, you’re tied in. So I had one chance to make the right decision.”

The solution: web filtering framework from Jisc
It was while attending an IT managers’ forum that Gerber learned about the Jisc web filtering framework – a purchasing framework that makes it simpler to find, research and buy suitable web filtering software.

Using the framework, Gerber was able to access a list of web filtering solutions, along with guidance on each. This meant he was able to make an informed decision on web filtering – ultimately selecting software from iBoss. (Other suppliers are available: for the full list, see jisc.ac.uk/web-filtering).

Efficiency benefits of using the framework
A clear benefit of the framework, says Gerber, was its ease of use.

"It was so easy," he says. "Whenever we do a large project, one of the hardest things for me to have to do is to go out and get costs – but Jisc went out and did all the legwork for me."

“I went down the list, picked three, emailed each one and said: This is our dilemma. How can we solve this problem and what would your costs be?”

Knowing Jisc had prepared the purchasing framework gave extra confidence, Gerber says. “The first thing occurred to me is: if it’s made its way to the Jisc framework, it’s a viable product. That took away my concern.”
Although Jisc could not recommend any one product or vendor, it was able to offer Gerber guidance so he could make informed choices. For example, an ‘operational requirement’ document on the Jisc website includes details of criteria for vendors and suppliers – and this helped Gerber reach his decision.

Overall, the process saved Gerber time. “This was a decision I was able to make in weeks as opposed to months,” he says – which meant he could start using the new web filtering system earlier, increasing the benefit to the college.

Ultimately, Gerber was also able to find a solution that was cost-effective – meeting one of his original criteria.

And he was also able to choose a scalable solution, which has helped as the college has needed to increase bandwidth. “Only minimal changes were needed to bring the iBoss appliances into our infrastructure,” says Gerber. “Apart from that, it’s just boxes out, boxes in.”

Benefits to staff and students
A benefit of the solution Gerber ultimately chose was the granularity of its user-based filtering – making it flexible enough to meet the needs of different types of student.

“If a 25-year-old history student needs to look at the history of prostitution in Victorian England, that’s not a problem – but I don’t need a 16-year-old doing that,” he explains.

“I can target a learner, I can target a group of learners, or I can target the whole campus. We can finesse aspects of our web filtering now to meet student requirements.”

Anything to add about Jisc?
“The benefit of working through Jisc is that they’re doing the hard work for us,” says Gerber. “Because they’re not vying for my money, they’re not fighting to sell me a product – and not trying to get me to do something that isn’t in my best interest.

“They don’t say: ‘You should buy X’. They say: ‘Look – X, Y and Z exist, all three are all good products, and we can tell you why they’re good products, but it’s down to you and your requirements.’”

Vendor view: ‘It doesn’t only save money – it saves time’
Procuring from security vendors can be expensive and time-consuming for colleges and universities – as Devon Sanders, channel manager for iBoss supplier Emeiatec Ltd, knows from meeting clients in research and education.

That’s one reason why, from a vendor’s point of view, it makes sense to be part of an independent framework that helps solve the problem.

“Putting something out to tender can cost colleges and universities a lot of money,” Sanders says. “But with the web filtering framework, Jisc has made information about products readily available.

“Using their experts and experience, they’ve done the hard work. Not only does it save colleges and universities money, but it saves them time.”