Exemplary Performance: EKC Group

EKC Group, a large family of FE colleges across multiple campuses, needed to adapt quickly to the IT needs of students, staff, and the local community. However, the IT team recognised the need to respond quickly to challenges, but did not have in-house specialists for every technology. This led to the recognition of the value of outside help.

The retained expertise project started when a server operating system upgrade was required, as well as an identity provider upgrade to Shibboleth, the open-source identity management software. Barry Boden, director of technology at EKC Group, explains:

“We thought: ‘We can probably figure it out given enough time, but life’s short, so let’s try to find someone to help get it done.’ And when we approached Jisc, they suggested that retained expertise could help with the upgrade and also anything else that comes along.”

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Of course, what these services have in common is that they enable trusted authentication to services — from library resources to roaming — so that users can seamlessly access the services they’re supposed to, using the credentials of their home organisation.

The service has meant, for example, that when EKC Group needed to deploy a solution to authenticate participants in student elections at the start of term, ensuring that single votes were cast, it could turn to Jisc for Shibboleth support in enabling it.

Or, more recently, there was a need to have Jobcentre Plus employees working on site at a satellite campus — as part of a project to get local people into employment. After a quarterly review of the retained expertise service, EKC Group decided that a future-facing solution was to implement govroam, the roaming service which provides ‘zero touch’ internet access for public sector workers.

And EKC Group also used the service to improve eduroam security, by finding a way to blacklist devices from the system.
Benefits: quick, trusted access to specialists
The main benefit of the trusted identity retained expertise has been quick and simple access to a specialist. "When something needs doing, calling or emailing a subject expert is far simpler than us trying to spend days working it out," explains Barry.

Nathan Friend, infrastructure and systems manager at EKC Group, agrees. "When something needs to be deployed quickly, we could probably work it out eventually, but it’s good to have that rapid approach – and to know it’s done in the right way. Jisc have always been quick to respond."

"The Jisc service desk is good, but you do feel like your request is fast-tracked when you put ‘retained expertise’ in the subject line," he adds.

Having the retained expertise is better than recruiting a trust and identity specialist, says Barry, because there isn’t enough work to justify an in-house team member – making the service appropriate for those few days a year when a trust and identity specialist is needed.

Another benefit of the service is that EKC Group are learning all the time – because Jisc are happy to work using remote sessions with someone from the IT team watching. "Of course, it’s reassuring from an information security point of view," says Barry, "because although we trust Jisc, we can reassure people that no one’s left unsupervised. But it’s also very handy, as we have learnt simple shell commands that we didn’t know."

And Jisc are also honest about when a piece of work is outside their expertise, he says. That, he says, is better than a scenario where he’s paying to do investigative work on a project that isn’t a good fit.

Lessons learned: the importance of seeking outside help
According to Barry, using Jisc’s retained trust and identity expertise has confirmed the importance of going to an expert in the job you want to do. "We would have got there in the end, but sometimes it’s better to talk to an expert and get something sorted out in quicker time. We’re grateful for the good service."

"You don’t know how much you rely on it until you’ve had it," adds Nathan. "We didn’t take out the service specifically to fix the things we ended up needing it for – but as they came along, it took up the slack."

Find out more:
Learn about our retained expertise service here: jisc.ac.uk/consultancy/retained-expertise
Contact our T&I team here: trustandidentity@jisc.ac.uk
Or, contact your relationship manager jisc.ac.uk/contact/your-account-manager