

Delivering a Digital Strategy for Greenwood Academies Trust



Stephen Sanderson is Chief Information Officer for Greenwood Academies Trust (GAT). He joined the organisation in 2015 and inherited an IT system that was not fit for purpose. Each academy had a separate system for emails, management information and technical support. The systems did not 'talk' to each other, there was no single sign-in and the result of so many different systems being operated simultaneously was escalating costs. Stephen was frustrated to find that his discontent with the system was matched by that of the Academy Principals. He was told that the IT system was a barrier to efficiency and precluded staff from preparing students effectively for the digital world of work into which they would graduate.

Stephen was relentless in his determination to change the way things were done at GAT. The drivers for change were clear: the need to cut costs to academies; the imperative of providing security for sensitive data; the requirement to save staff valuable time and, above all, to ensure that the final product was easy to use. Several professional services companies were consulted on the best approach to

take and all agreed that a cloud-based solution was the way forward. It also became clear that using Microsoft's Office 365 suite and Azure cloud would be the best way to secure the interconnectivity that was desired. This required a new system to be built from scratch in the background whilst services to all 28 academies and the Central Services team were maintained. The estimated cost was £1.5 million but once built the return would be a 20% reduction on costs year on year. A business case to this effect was presented to the Trust Board in late 2016 and gained unanimous approval.

Between January and September 2017, GAT IT Engineers worked with the selected professional services company to build the system. This brought together a cloud-based core services, WAN connectivity, LAN infrastructure, security systems, licensing servers, swapping data centers, single sign-in, automation, office 365, telephony, centralised IT support and a printing solution. It was a huge undertaking.



Migrating the Trust's (then) 28 academies and Central Services team to the new system was not something that could be done without rigorous testing of the system that was built. Two academies, one primary and one secondary piloted the new system. This pilot programme ran from September 2017 to May 2018. Pilot schools received a thorough, personalised, handover plan and access to high quality training to enable staff to make effective use of the new programmes and systems they had access to. These included OneDrive, OneNote and Teams. The pilots ran until every possible wrinkle was ironed out of the system and Stephen knew with certainty that the end users were happy with the system they had created. Only at this point was the migration programme for the rest of the Trust initiated.

GAT's approach to migration is both counter-intuitive and highly effective. Most changes to schools' IT systems are scheduled to take place outside of term time. It was a central tenet of the GAT plan that no migration took place unless schools were in session. The reasons for this are obvious, you cannot provide personalised handover to staff who are on holiday and you cannot solve teething problems if the academy isn't operating as normal. All of GAT's (now) 34 schools were successfully migrated by Autumn 2019. All received a personalised handover plan and high-quality training around the systems and software.

What has been the result of this wholesale change? Heads and staff report high levels of satisfaction with a system that they believe has transformed the way they work; improved their work life balance and equipped them to respond to the demands of 21st century learners. Stephen has delivered the costs savings he promised at project initiation and secured for the Trust a system to rival the best that exists in the business sector. Already he is focusing on the next steps to ensure that the system remains cutting edge and fit for purpose in a digital economy.

What can we learn from this approach?

- The importance of having a well thought-through strategy
- Do not underestimate the time and energy it takes to manage such a huge programme of change
- Have a restless enthusiasm for what you do