Report

Strategies for embracing new technology in education

July 2022

Introduction

As the Management Information System (MIS) market shifts, more and more councils are embracing changing technology. But for many, change presents concerns around capacity, impact on internal structures and getting to grips with new systems. With many councils wanting to provide choice to their schools and follow the lead of those who are already seeking to harness modern technology, including cloud-based MIS, knowing where to start can be a daunting prospect.

Hampshire County Council and Herts for Learning are two organisations that have already embraced a move to the cloud when it comes to school MIS. In this report, hear from both organisations on how they managed this project internally, advice they would give to others, and what it was that encouraged them to take action.

We also spoke with Amazon Web Services (AWS) about the trends they've seen across the public sector, and how local authorities across the UK can take advice from, and be encouraged by, others who have managed similar projects.

Interview with Catherine Tallis, Director of Business Services at Herts for Learning

What was the deciding factor when it came to moving away from a partnership with a single supplier?

The simple answer to this is that we realised one size does not fit all. The needs of a very small, rural primary school are different from a ten form entry secondary school – and these needs continue to diversify. As we were tracking the market, we recognised the need to bring the best in class products to different segments of schools, settings and trusts. We made the decision that we needed a multi-supplier approach. It's important to us that schools have choice, and are aware of the technology out there that is better suited to their needs.

Was the move to multiple MIS suppliers part of a broader digital strategy?

Yes – we are cloud advocates. There are significant benefits: 30% cost savings, less time chasing data, consolidated systems, reduction in both workload and risk. We've been encouraging schools to adopt whole cloud solutions, but we saw MIS as the foundation stone. The rest of the infrastructure will follow.

Did your team have any concerns as you moved to work with multiple MIS suppliers?

No, our data management services team are passionate about supporting schools, so they embraced the change. The team witnessed the market shifting, and were keen to move with the times; they relished the opportunity to provide schools with the very best service. It's been a change management process for them, as well as the schools, but all in all, they've loved the opportunity to diversify.

What were your blockers and how did you overcome them?

Our biggest blocker was staff capacity. We thought about borrowing school business managers or data managers, but decided that presented its own challenges. Instead, we rethought our own process and grouped schools together in the onboarding process. We found that schools appreciated working alongside schools with similar characteristics, so this is something we're going to keep doing, meaning we've found solutions that work better than the original solutions we had in place.

Can you describe the journey and what you've learned so far?

There's no doubt it was challenging, but also very rewarding. The team have lived by our values – trust, inspiration and collaboration, and have adapted brilliantly. We've now moved 270 schools to Arbor and counting.

We've learned our strategy was right! 60% of our customer base have decided to adopt a cloud MIS, with many more indicating they are keen to switch in the next two years. We would be happy to provide the temporary resources to others embarking on this scale of change.

What has the response from schools been?

Positive – the number of switchers speaks volumes! They were really pleased that they were offered choice and value, with many finding that the cloud offering was both competitive and compelling. Anecdotally, I've heard many stories from heads about how it's transforming their way of working. One school said that it's amazing to see all a student's information in one place. Another head said they'd embedded live links into his governor report, meaning the data is always up-to-date. Little things like that make a big difference to headteachers.

What advice would you give to other local authorities who are thinking about working with cloud-based MIS suppliers?

I'd circle back to our main driver: one size doesn't fit all. It would be a great shame, with all that the market has to offer, to tie schools into a single supplier. Ultimately, schools will begin to look elsewhere.

There is also an assumption that creating economies of scale by having a single supplier are going to drive the best cost. But our framework, which embraces 'competitive tension', puts that myth to bed. It's also worth mentioning that the data migration piece is really easy.

What have you got planned next?

Now that so many of our schools are using a cloud-based MIS, we want to encourage the rest of their infrastructure to follow. It can be hard to encourage schools to embark on projects that don't impact directly on teaching and learning. But I would argue that if you can derive valuable information from great data and realise a 30% cost saving, then the resources of time and money can be reinvested into teaching and learning.

The other goal for us is to take our framework nationally, so that other local authorities can save the time and cost of running a procurement. We have three ranked MIS providers on the framework, offering great choice and value. We would love to partner with other local authorities in order to help as many schools as possible realise the benefits of a cloud-based MIS. It's a compliant and well-received framework, and our mindset is that there is no point in reinventing the wheel – so it's a tool we'd love to share.

Interview with Jenny Collins, MIS Schools Programme Manager at Hampshire County Council

What was the deciding factor when it came to moving away from a partnership with a single supplier?

We're always looking at how we offer the best support for the schools in our area. Over the past two years, we've seen a steady decline in the number of schools using SIMS, with the majority moving to Arbor. We lost approximately 25% of our customer base, so it was no longer financially viable to carry on with our hosted environment. In March 2022, as part of the review of our service, we decided that Arbor was the leading challenger in the market and that we should offer support for their MIS as well. Schools always have a choice about which providers they use, so it was about us responding to where the volumes were moving.

Did you or your team have any concerns as you moved to work with multiple MIS suppliers?

The main concern from the team was around our ability to maintain quality of service while staff were taken off the support rota to undertake accreditation. Communication is key during a time of significant change – staff were briefed about the reasons for the change, and the support team leader provided encouragement on a one-to-one basis. The team were included in detailed planning activities, ensuring their buy-in. Also, the team could see the market changing, and knew that this was a good opportunity for both themselves and the schools.

What were your blockers and how did you overcome them?

Management approval was our first big blocker – but the figures spoke for themselves once the decision paper was compiled. There was also a nervousness from our team about their ability to succeed, particularly in the accreditation tests. Arbor's partnership team was very supportive, with regular progress checkpoints to maintain focus, as well as being quick to respond to ad hoc questions.

Has this move on a vast scale felt successful?

Our measure of success is ultimately the feedback from schools. There's no denying that it's extra work for a small team, but schools are finding the new system far more intuitive to use. It's easier for the teachers to get what information they want out of it. Schools like the way Arbor reacts to feedback and the way you can vote for changes or join working groups.

It's been good for us as an organisation as we can now bring a bit more pressure to bear on things that are Hampshire-specific, such as our own assessment model; we're working with Arbor to fine-tune this to make use of assessment material better for our schools.

Some schools have told us that the decision to choose Arbor was based on the fact that we were now providing the support service, which is great to hear. We differ from many support partners in our pricing approach, which is flat rather than per pupil. What's been interesting is that we've had schools sign up to our service – even where we're more expensive for them – because they value the personal service we provide. The schools have also understood that this is a journey for us as an organisation – there's a recognition that we are all in this to ensure the best outcomes for the children in the county. One of my colleagues recently said, "our schools are being really nice and understanding that we are on this journey together."

How has the move to multiple suppliers affected how you work with schools?

We're still aiming to provide the same valued service, irrespective of the MIS used by schools. We provide a personal one-to-one service, talking our customers through the resolution of their queries. We have a continuous service improvement ethos, meaning we regularly review our procedures and gain feedback from our schools. We consider customer feedback crucial, and we use multiple channels to make sure our message gets out, and their responses can get back to us, be this through surveys, headteacher strategy groups or conferences.

What advice would you give to other local authorities who are nervous about opening up this decision to their schools?

The decision to change MIS has always been the prerogative of schools, meaning they will move regardless, if they think it is more cost-effective or a better system, particularly if other schools in the area have already done so successfully. Local Authorities need to be proactive, rather than reactive, by joining schools on this journey and embracing change.

Interview with Andrew Proctor, Executive Lead for Education at Amazon Web Services

How has the move to the cloud looked across other parts of the public sector?

Traditionally, I think the public sector has looked at digital transformation as a set of projects to implement new technologies, rather than an embedded cultural change. Those that have moved to the cloud are able to see past technology as something that simply keeps the lights on. It has accelerated and de-risked innovation.

What we've seen over the past two years is evolution and adaptation in the education sector, rather than true transformation and reinvention, such as moving lessons online. This does not dismiss the incredible work that the public sector has had to do in a very short amount of time, but it demonstrates that they've been limited to almost reproducing what they've already been doing via different methods, rather than reinventing.

What learnings could the education sector take to help propel their digital transformation forward?

The adoption of a cloud mindset should be central to any plans for transformation, viewing the cloud as something that can help teams focus directly on their users. When I was first at Staffordshire University, one of the things I was able to do was to shift the focus of

monthly meetings away from maintenance of the system, through to what new functionality the team had delivered that directly helped staff and students. Ultimately, cloud was a springboard for something bigger. We weren't worrying about the data centre.

It's important to note that you don't need to boil the ocean and seek perfection. Public sector governance doesn't often align with digital and agile ways of operating. There's a tendency towards multi-year business plans where every detail must be nailed down. Teams need to accept that traditional governance and its rigidity may not always be conducive to the benefits of cloud.

What advice would you give to those unsure about how to go about making change?

Don't try to reproduce what you've already done in the cloud. Look at and take advantage of the springboard that a cloud offering can provide. Of course, you can make cost efficiencies and savings, but the real advantage of cloud is the ability to be innovative and agile.

You should also look to the huge community of support that's out there. You don't have to do it all alone. Many organisations, sectors, and industries have reinvented themselves and are willing to offer a helping hand.

What barriers have other sectors faced when approaching digital transformation?

Organisations always have barriers, but many of these are actually just perceived barriers.

The security of the cloud is one example. There's a trust and comfort to having something under physical lock and key in a data centre within your building. Cloud doesn't remove locks and keys, it just does them in a different way. You still get 100% control over who has access to your data and applications.

Another concern is around skills and people. In such a fast-paced sector as IT, the ability to upskill is viewed as an exciting opportunity for internal teams. It's a positive thing.

How do other sectors make large-scale projects manageable?

It's healthy to think big, but start small. This big idea that all schools will move to the cloud is absolutely right and proper, but the key is to start small, learn some lessons and demonstrate both success and value. Start by migrating those systems that aren't complex to do.

How should the needs of end users or customers be aligned and managed with a centralised project?

In terms of practical advice, the establishment of some core tenets for the project is very important, such as you will always prioritise the security of people's data. When you come to some difficult decisions that you need to

communicate to everyone, you can refer back to those tenets, as well make sure that you're staying true to what was agreed upfront. Communicating those key tenets to the broader school community can be very helpful.

It's important to advocate that, even though there may be some initial trade-offs, the cloud gives you much more time and resource to invest back into your users. Advocating that to the user community is really important.

Is there anything you'd like to add?

I would add that there is a lot in the public sector and education sector to celebrate. There is plenty of opportunity for them in terms of digital transformation, but I think they should take a sense of pride in what they have achieved during a challenging few years, how important they've been, and how important they will continue to be.

Round-up

Whilst moving to the cloud is undoubtedly a daunting project, existing councils and services are a testament to both the success and necessity of embracing digital change.

As highlighted by these interviews, everything comes down to giving schools choice, and providing them with that 'foundation stone' of technology that will ultimately improve outcomes for students and reduce workload for school staff.

To join the conversation, book your spot on our webinar on 18 October 2022

Join **Phillippa De'Ath**, Chief Revenue Officer at Arbor, in conversation with **Catherine Tallis**, Director of Business Services at Herts for Learning, **Jenny Collins**, MIS Schools Programme Manager at Hampshire County Council and **Andrew Proctor**, Executive Lead for Education at Amazon Web Services (AWS), for a fireside chat on how they have embraced changing technology to transform education in their sectors.

They'll talk through the common challenges they faced in the early days of planning, what strategies they put in place to work in a different way, and the outcomes they have seen at the schools in their local authority and in the wider education community.

Book your place on the webinar: bit.ly/3R7eWLo

Get in touch

If you'd like to talk through any of the above, we'd love to hear from you! We've worked with over 3,500 schools, MATs and councils across the country with their move to the cloud.

We'd be happy to chat through any concerns or questions you may have – just email Phillippa De'Ath, Chief Revenue Officer at Arbor: phillippa.de-ath@arbor-education.com or connect with her on LinkedIn: linkedin.com/in/phillippa-de-ath

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