

Virtually Speaking

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Oriel Specialist Mathematics and Computing College - a SoftXpand user profile

Posted by Dan Kusnetzky @ 3:00 am

Recently I had the opportunity to hear from Mark Woolner, someone who is using MiniFrame's SoftXpand every day. I thought that I'd pass on his comments to you. This, by the way, is a follow on post from the post *MiniFrame SoftXpand*.

Oriel Specialist Mathematics and Computing College is a forward thinking dynamic secondary learning establishment, located in Norfolk, UK, with 960 students. The college benefits from a positive leadership team focused on delivering "Excellence in Learning" with an "Every Child Matters" attitude. It's a community minded establishment that stays active well into the evening (the site manager can often be seen locking up around 10 pm). My name is Mark Woolner, and I am the Network Administrator at the college.

What are you doing that needs this technology?

When I first started working as Network Administrator at the college in November 2007, I saw the all too familiar 25 – 30 beige boxes, crammed into a room, with a mismatch of CRT monitors perched on-top of the PCs to allow just enough room for an almost complete QWERTY keyboard and 'rugby balled' ball mouse. With each station pumping out around 1KW of heat, the central heating was surplus to requirements.

The College has had to deal with a legacy of "mend and make do" which resulted in the catch 22 situation of poor quality PC's leading to a poor attitude towards PC's. The heavy handed use by students had left its mark and staff came to expect issues when using ICT. "Do Not Use" and "Out Of Order" signs were seen too many times! I first worked at the school for 2 days a week, which meant I was always playing catch-up with a lot of time spent investigating faults caused by students either "sticking things IN" (pens, paper, sandwiches) or "taking things OUT" (network, monitor & power cables along with CD drive belts).

The network would often be taken down because a student, unable to see through the spaghetti junction of wiring, had inadvertently caused a loop back by plugging a network

cable into two network points! To sum up, I needed an easy to use solution that would provide the students with top performance ICT.

What did you consider before making a selection?

- Ease of use of system, hence preventing problems before they happen
- The valuable space the system would take up
- Heat produced by the system
- The quality and performance of the PCs
- The number of wires
- The number of network ports needed, as well as network load
- The cost
- Energy consumed

Why did you select this technology?

When I first saw the SoftXpand system, I immediately thought of how this could reduce the number of “things” students could “stick IN” and “take OUT” of my stressed PCs; they would only have a keyboard, monitor, and mouse to mess with. What’s more a number of the other issues were addressed by the system: more desk space, less wires, less heat, much less network ports, and of course, the huge cost saving. SoftXpand offered us 75% hardware and electricity cost savings.

This would enable us to buy powerful host PCs and large screens to give the students an impressive user interface. SoftXpand has recently won the Green Apple Environment Award for its environmental qualities, which we value at the college, and has also won the PC Plus Performance Award.

What tangible benefits has your organization received through the use of this technology?

The first great advantage witnessed was the speed at which you can log on and off the system (six people can log on in around 8 seconds); there is no lengthy booting time. Students were amazed by the 20” wide screen technology we had employed. Up to now students had been using 17” CRT monitors or the 19” monitors that were set to a screen resolution of 1240 X 768. Now they are seeing 1440 X 900 for the first time so they can actually see “The big picture”, view PowerPoint and Flash Animations, create large images in Prodesktop and 2D Design along with full width spreadsheets.

Such multimedia features are possible because we can build very powerful systems which can be shared by all, so although our system may cost around £1100 (\$1628) it’s split between 6 users (less than £190 (\$281) per student seat) who have access to an Intel quad core processor, 3 GB of High Speed DDR2 Memory and 256MB of video each. With SoftXpand’s intelligent load balancing controlling how the system resources are optimised, users are guaranteed 80% of the system resource when they need it.

Before installing SoftXpand in the staffroom, there were only 2 PCs and 2 network points, and printing could only be done to a locally attached printer (no free network points). The 6 user PC we fitted in the staffroom only needed 1 network point, so we were able to use the other one for a network printer.

We have also experienced a difference in the speed of setting up the PCs; in one afternoon, we set up 24 workstations. The college has seen huge cost reductions in electricity (1 PC for

every user in cluster instead of individual PCs), dramatic savings in network points (only 1 network point needed for each cluster), and we find that installing software and updates to a room of 5 PCs is a lot quicker and easier than to a room with 30.

We have now installed a total of 292 individual student workstations all over the college, in ICT suites, a technology room, the staffroom and the library. I was able to provide the college with many more times the number of workstations within the same budget, and at the same time, I did not need to compromise on quality.

What advice would you offer others facing similar challenges?

Don't be afraid to adapt to new technologies, especially when the investment is so small with software-only solutions. By keeping up with modern IT solutions you are also setting a good example to inquisitive students. My advice would be to embrace multiseat computing; it will solve all your ICT problems! Contact MiniFrame by emailing them to be referred to your nearest SoftXpand reseller, or to arrange to meet them at the Bett trade show in London, UK, 14th to 17th January, or download a trial version of SoftXpand.



Daniel Kusnetzky is with KG LLC. He is responsible for research and publications on a broad array of technology topics. He examines emerging technology trends, vendor strategies, research and development issues, and end-user integration requirements. You can follow Dan on Twitter. See his full profile and disclosure of his industry affiliations.

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