

ICT doesn't keep us awake at night anymore says national adult education charity, WEA

With ICT high up on their 'risk register', and serious interruptions to service affecting key operations, a national charity needed specialist IT support to replace failing infrastructure and transform their support operations.

The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) is the UK's largest voluntary sector provider of adult education in the UK, dedicated to bringing high-quality, professional education into the heart of communities. With the support of nearly 3,000 volunteers, 2,000 tutors and over 10,000 members, the WEA pride themselves in delivering friendly, accessible and enjoyable vocational and recreational courses for adults from all walks of life.

"We were founded in 1903. There is a lot of history, tradition and pride in that amongst the staff and the tutors we work with, as well as our volunteers. We are custodians of something precious."

ICT high on 'risk register'

David Morris, ICT Manager at the WEA, says the biggest challenge when he joined the organisation was the reliability of the ICT infrastructure. Almost on a daily basis they experienced serious disruptions to service that affected many of the key functions they relied on.

"ICT in its entirety was very high up on the risk register. Now it is not the burning issue keeping people awake at night that it once was. I cannot recall the last time we had a major outage - the service is just there, and ICT isn't in the headlights because something is wrong any more."

Drive for efficiency

As a charity, the WEA is dependant on the funding and grants it receives from a variety of sources to deliver its activities. Providing these funding bodies with financial reports and detailed evidence of the work carried out is essential.

Without a reliable ICT system, it would be almost impossible for the charity to produce and deliver the level of reporting it is required to produce.

"A significant amount of our funding comes from grants, and we have to account for that. We need to report back on how the money is being spent and demonstrate that we provide courses in deprived postcode areas, and for certain sections of the community. There is a lot of information collected and collated into our management information system which is core to that activity."

With increasing pressures on the charity sector, the WEA is having to change and reinvent itself to some extent says David,

"Our activities have to be streamlined to make sure they are financially sustainable and delivery has to be as efficient as we can make it. Our learner expectations are changing too. People now expect their courses to be presented using digital means."

"It is just a very open, easy relationship to have with a supplier."

David Morris, ICT Manager WEA

Support remote workers

The ICT system is crucial in supporting the charity's day to day operations, as it relies heavily on the use of email, intranet and internet sites. It also needs to support the needs of remote workers.

"We make extensive use of remote desktop facilities, so that information can be shared amongst our various teams. Many won't be in the office every day - they will be out in the community. They need to access files, produce reports, and examine spreadsheets - all from a variety of locations."

Hardware at end of life

Traditionally, the charity refreshed their hardware every three to four years. The servers were coming to the end of their operational life when he joined the WEA, says David.

"I was brought in to stabilise our IT systems. We had quotes from a number of organisations for replacement items, but we selected Bluecube to help us sort the infrastructure out, because it was something that needed to be done very quickly and they were able to help us with the transition as well supplying the new equipment."

Decided to relocate servers

As part of the work to replace their servers, the charity took the opportunity to evaluate the location of their core infrastructure too. *"Our servers were hosted in London's Docklands, and although the data centre we used was fine, we felt there were risks associated with having our servers in this location. Bluecube helped us to quickly set up a new infrastructure in a data centre in Milton Keynes."*

Specialist IT support required

Following the successful relocation of its core infrastructure the WEA decided to look at outsourcing their IT support requirements, as they felt they didn't have the required IT skills in-house to support the organisation. *"We went through a tendering process, having defined what we wanted. After evaluating all the bids, we decided to award Bluecube that contract, and they have been looking after us and our infrastructure ever since."*

A collaborative relationship

Cost, says David, was a deciding factor in choosing Bluecube. But, also credibility in that they support clients, who though not necessarily in the charity sector, had requirements that were very similar to the needs identified by the WEA.

It's been collaborative relationship ever since he says, *"I don't think either party has played the contract to the letter of the law. Obviously,, this and our SLA are there to fall back on if needed, but It has been very much a case of 'we are partners in this arrangement, and we need to work together to make sure it is a successful undertaking'. The relationship has worked well, and been really, really good for us."*

Full ICT support service provided

Today, Bluecube host and maintain all the WEA's servers, provide the ICT infrastructure for their offices

across the country, support users in those offices, provide a secure data back-up service and look after the email system.

Staff are no longer frustrated with ICT says David, *"With the Bluecube system, when someone phones up and reports a fault, a ticket is created, the requirement is identified and someone is on the case. The progress towards resolution is very clear – very transparent. You can log on and see what is happening, you can examine the current status of any ticket. It is very refreshing."*

Meet to go through issues

A service level agreement is in place requiring the WEA and Bluecube to meet formally three or four times a year and review the service.

"There are escalation procedures in the SLA if we believe Bluecube are not meeting their obligation to us, but we've never needed to invoke them. It is just so easy and Bluecube are so accommodating. It's great having such a very open, easy relationship with a supplier."

Advice is real value-add

"The value-add, and this is difficult to write into a contract, is for me to be able to pick up the phone and say, 'Right, we have this situation, or we are thinking of doing this, what do you reckon?'. Bluecube's advice has been very, very valuable."

David quotes a recent example where the WEA identified a need for some new infrastructure with enhanced security features and extensive use of data encryption. He says they sought Bluecube's advice and are now moving forward with this, having incorporated a number of Bluecube's suggestions into the requirement.

"Having a commercial organisation to work with who are very responsive and can bring a breadth of experience to the table has been very good for the WEA. It has allowed us to get where we needed to be a lot faster than we would have had we attempted to get there on our own."

Relationship works

The relationship works because Bluecube is an integral part of their day to day operations, *"There is no discernible gap that we have to jump over to access them or get something done. As with any relationship, there are occasions when you might look back and think, OK, we might have done that a bit differently... but we've never got close to a point where we've thought, 'Oh my goodness, that was a nightmare! Definitely not!'"*

Ethos of customer service

The success of the relationship is in no small part due to Bluecube's focus on customer service and customer support, says David. *"It's about the assurances, the advice, and the confidence that everything is alright. It's the intangible things. Bluecube instinctively know what you need and make it happen, almost without a second thought."*

"Bluecube are very responsive. We feel valued as a customer."

David Morris, ICT Manager WEA

Absence of complaints is best metric

The WEA feel one of the biggest benefits is that they can spend more time concentrating on what they want to achieve, rather than worrying about whether ICT facilities are available and working today.

"It allows us to manage the ICT facilities with a relatively light touch. The absence of any complaints about the ICT services is probably the best metric of saying it is a successful arrangement. We have our moments, but we're light years away from where we were four or five years ago."

A very good fit

David says that if they tried hard they could possibly find a more technically competent, or more responsive provider. *"But all these things interact with each other and price isn't everything. It is about finding a fit that is right for you, and for us Bluecube has been and is a very good fit."*

"The bottom line? Bluecube are very responsive. We feel valued as a customer, and we feel we are getting really good value from using their services."



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