FITS case study

Improving delivery of ICT technical support

Thornleigh is a secondary voluntary-aided comprehensive school with sports college status. Having about 1,670 pupils aged 11 to 18 plus 113 teaching staff and 69 associate staff, it is a large school. Yet the school's network manager, Kevin McAleer, does not have the air of someone struggling to keep his head above water coping with the myriad problems that can arise in a complex school network. Part of the reason lies in Kevin's belief that buying good-quality equipment – preferably all from the same manufacturer – gives fewer headaches and more value for money in the long run.

Another reason for the calm is the adoption of Becta's FITS programme. It all began when Kevin attended an 'Implementing FITS' expert workshop. There, the participants assessed their current ICT support processes and analysed their needs to help determine the best order for them to implement FITS processes.

For Thornleigh, the implementation of just one process, the Service Desk, paid dividends almost immediately. Instead of collaring a technician in the corridor, teachers now call on Mike, who staffs the service desk, where they explain the problem. More often than not, Mike is able to resolve the issue there and then, either by talking the teacher through it or by taking over the teacher's screen.

"We've worked out that Mike deals with 60% of the issues straight away," enthuses Kevin. "That leaves us more time to keep the hardware and software up to date, and make sure that everything runs as smoothly as possible."

Interestingly, Kevin has found that while the FITS approach is very useful – it is comprehensive, consistent and logical – the systems themselves do not have to be tremendously sophisticated. For example, the incident knowledge base used by the service desk is a simple spreadsheet. Kevin explains: "The important thing is to get a system in place that works. Start small and build up from there."

About FITS

Since the launch of the best-practice Framework for ICT Technical Support (FITS) on Becta's website, many schools have implemented the FITS processes to improve their ICT management and support.

Ofsted's report *ICT in Schools 2004: the impact of government initiatives five years on* describes the Framework for ICT Technical Support as an effective tool for those integrating technical support into the strategic planning and management of a school.

For those responsible for ICT implementation, FITS provides a practical manual and toolkit, which serve a growing number of schools well.

Becta

ICT Advice

http://becta.org.uk/schools/technicalsupport

So has it been worth the expense of employing someone to sit behind a desk for several hours a day? At first some staff were sceptical, but the benefits became evident very quickly. The Service Desk is just one of several processes Kevin has introduced through the FITS programme. For example, software and hardware upgrades are not implemented on an ad hoc basis, but through a rigorous process that minimises disruption to people's work.

Although it has taken time to implement the changes, the results have been noticeable. Staff often tell Kevin that the service they enjoy from his team is second to none, and all the other secondary schools in the area recognise Thornleigh Salesian College as a beacon of excellence as far as technical support is concerned.

Kevin agrees that it wasn't a completely smooth ride, because there is inevitably some resistance to change. "People often want something done immediately," says Kevin, "and don't appreciate the value in going through a proper process. But ultimately they see the benefits in reduced 'down time' and less risk of disasters occurring."

So what is Kevin's advice to a school thinking about adopting the FITS programme? "Don't try and do everything at once: the documentation can be a bit daunting, but you'd be surprised how much you can get through by devoting just fifteen minutes a day to it. After a while it becomes easier because all the documentation is set out in the same sort of way. Then, when you're feeling confident, introduce a few small changes or 'quick wins', and see how people react. The great thing about the FITS approach is that it's been tried and tested in industry for the last twenty years: it works!"

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04/DD04-05/1024/T076-3/AB/1K

FITS processes

FITS stands for Framework for ICT Technical Support and is based on the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL) which has been tried and tested over 20 years.

Each of the 10 main process topics covers a different area of best-practice technical support…

- Service Desk
- Incident Management
- Problem Management
- Change Management
- Release Management
- Configuration Management
- Availability and Capacity Management
- Service Level Management
- Service Continuity Management
- Financial Management

The advice given is neither definitive nor prescriptive but should be adapted and adopted to fit each school individually, based on the school's resources and needs.

FITS support

Resources downloadable from Becta

- Advice and guidance
- Toolkits
- Assessment

FITS online community

http://www.becta.org.uk/ technicalsupportcommunity

FITS pocket guide

A handy reference book for anyone involved in ICT management or day-to-day technical support in schools

Available to order from Becta publications [http://www.becta.org.uk/publications]

Training workshops

- FITS overview
- Implementing FITS

http://becta.org.uk/schools/ technicalsupport