Stretford High School Case Study

AXESS SYSTEMS

How Axess Systems enabled 'Home Access' of the ICT network at Stretford High School*

** and at the same time established the hidden cost of introducing VDI*

Stretford High School

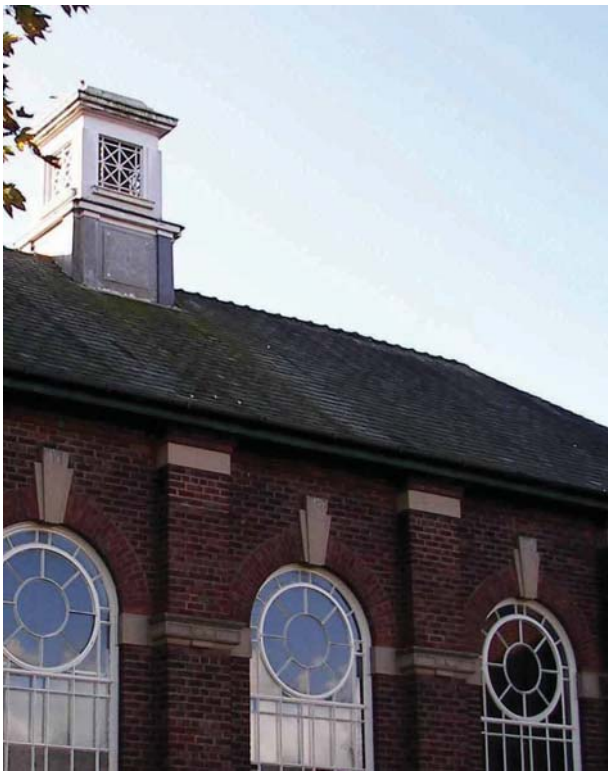
Background

Stretford High School is situated in Greater Manchester, literally yards away from the world famous Old Trafford cricket and football grounds. The school caters for students between the ages of 11 to 16 years, and has a specific focus on providing excellence in languages.

Darren Bewsher, ICT Manager of Stretford High School, had a new classroom and library which needed to be equipped for 90 users, and wanted to coincide this project with the opportunity to introduce secure home / remote access of its ICT network to all of its 650 students and 100 staff.

Darren Brewsher commented: "I saw the opportunity to advance the capabilities of our ICT by introducing a solution, which would not only enable home access for students and staff, but would also deliver a step change in our ICT infrastructure… improving security, improving the manageability of the network, and to be easily scalable, whilst at the same time still being cost effective."

Home access has significant benefits for both students and staff. For the students is has proven educational benefits, one of the main ones being the increased levels of collaboration amongst the students, due to their ability to work on projects and homework outside of school



Background cont'd

hours. Likewise the opportunity for staff and teachers to have access to the ICT network, from any computer with internet access, means that they are no longer tied to being at school for things such as lesson planning or grading.

On examining the solutions available, Darren was immediately drawn to the benefits of introducing Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI). VDI would enable him to provide a complete Microsoft XP desktop experience to all of the students, and staff, no matter where they were, or what specification of computer they had. The only requirement would be access to an internet connection.

"This solution seemed to be ideal. It created a secure and safe environment for students; one that would look and perform as if they were actually in school, but enable them to work at home or locations that suited their own particular needs." Commented Darren.

However, there was a major stumbling block to implementing this solution; Microsoft VM licensing structures namely VECD - Vista Enterprise Centralised Desktop. One of the key benefits of a VDI environment is it provides the ability to clone and replicate the Microsoft desktop OS from a centralised point and offer the end user a mature and enriched experience. Unfortunately, due to the fact Stretford High School had traditionally purchased OEM versions of Microsoft's operating system and applications, this meant the school did not have a 'Microsoft Volume Licensing Programme and Software Assurance' both being prerequisite elements that any end user legally requires if they wish to migrate towards a virtual desktop infrastructure.

The original request from Darren of being able to provide 90 users home access to a Microsoft XP desktop, again caused a problem, as the Microsoft license structure doesn't give the ability to provide services to concurrent users. In Stretford's case this meant they would need to sign 800 students, teachers and support staff onto this new Volume Licensing Programme and Software Assurance bundle, this equated to a cost somewhere in the region of £130,000 over a 3 year period. This figure unsurprisingly was well in excess of the budget available, when other aspects of the project needed to be included as well.

The Solution

By working with Axess Systems, Darren was able to utilise the full experience of the UK's leading independent supplier of Server Based Computing and Virtualisation solutions, to find a solution that would still achieve the same objectives, but one without the cost implications.

Working in partnership with Stretford High School, Simon Hill, Education Account Manager at Axess Systems investigated the possibility of developing a traditional Server Based Computing solution, utilising Thin Clients for the 90 users in the library and classroom. Citrix XenApp would then be used to provide the secure application delivery, which would enable the remote / home access, as well as enabling an enhanced layer of manageability and performance on top of the Servers' Windows 2008 Operating System.

The final hurdle to navigate would be the Microsoft OEM licensing. Whilst the OEM licensing agreements allowed the teachers to use the full Microsoft Office software from remote locations, the same licensing arrangements did not apply to the students. Therefore, Axess Systems looked at another alternative solution, and one which is gaining considerable ground in the education market, namely: Open Source Software.

OpenOffice 3.0 is a free to use, yet powerful piece of Open Source Software which provides word processing, spreadsheet, presentations, and database applications. OpenOffice 3.0 can handle all Microsoft Office files, and has a very similar feel to Windows 2000.

So when the students are in school they use the existing OEM Microsoft software, but when the students access the system remotely the Microsoft software is unavailable, and they use OpenSource. The teachers they always use the Microsoft licences.

Darren said: "Whilst this sounds a complicated and time consuming approach; it isn't. Axess Systems recommended that all of these software permissions and profiles be automatically managed through a piece of software called AppSense Application Manager. It was straightforward to implement, and now enables me to set profiles and permission very quickly."

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The Benefits

Home Access for students and staff

This Server Based Computing solution provides Stretford High School with the opportunity to deliver home and remote access, a key objective for the ICT department and the school. This also means that Stretford has the infrastructure in place ready for the phased introduction of the government's 'Home Access Programme', which will be rolled out throughout England by 2011.

Cost effective – using open source software

By adopting an innovative approach to using Open Source software, Stretford High School have been able to deliver a seamless solution that avoided the exorbitant licensing costs that would have been in excess of £130,000.

Licence compliance

By using AppSense, Stretford High School can ensure that the students only have access the applications they require and are properly licensed. This ensures that Stretford will always achieve compliance with their appropriate software licensing arrangements.

Reduced management time

As the solution is managed centrally, upgrades can be completed in a matter of minutes. "I can set rights, ports, establish the applications and profiles in a matter of minutes, rather than days, and of course it's all done centrally", commented Darren.

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Ease of scalability

Another great advantage of the Server Based Computing Solution is the fact that is so simple to increase the number of users. A perfect example of this is where Darren is looking at providing new terminals in the foyer area. Darren commented, "The foyer area will be available to the members of the public, so we need to have the ability to lock down the terminals to ensure they are only used for the purposes they are intended. The Thin Clients will be perfect for this as they are easy to install and I can lock them down in an instant."

Conclusion

In order to deliver a home access solution, the perceived benefits of using a VDI solution were negated by the licensing costs. So whilst VDI is 'the' buzz word in ICT, its implementation is far from straight forward or cost effective in certain circumstances. Darren summarised, "By using Axess Systems Stretford High School were able to introduce a system that has all of the advantages of a VDI network, but without the associated costs."

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