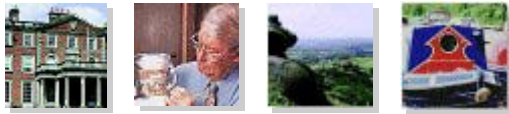


Staffordshire use web to distribute information to schools

Staffordshire County Council



When Staffordshire County Council's (SCC) Education Department needed a cost-effective and efficient means to communicate with its 413 schools and 3 referral units, the department turned to Hitec Laboratories for the solution. Since the successful installation of Hitec's DataStore® solution in 1995, the partnership between the two organisations has flourished. The latest implementation at SCC's Education Department is an enhanced DataStore system that has streamlined the department's operations using Internet / Intranet technology.

With over 20,000 staff including teachers, administrative workers, road engineers, scientists, crossing patrol wardens, social workers and librarians SCC is the county's biggest employer, administering to the needs of its 800,000 population. The education authority employs approximately 6,000 teachers in over 400 schools around the county for some 130,000 primary, middle and secondary school pupils, and 2,000 pupils in special schools and units.

The Education Department and schools work in partnership with many agencies to promote the highest quality of teaching and learning and equality of opportunity for the county's pupils and students whatever their age. The department plans and supports educational provision in the county guided by its values, principles and policies which have been developed in consultation with schools, governors, parents and professional bodies.

An important service provided by SCC's Education Department is to provide each school with regular, timely and accurate financial information to enable them to

effectively monitor their budgets, which can range from £5 Million down to £100,000. Although each school has its own financial information system, schools need to reconcile their systems with the formal books of account held by the local authority. A decision was made early on by SCC that it was incumbent on the authority to provide detailed information that the schools could rely on and be reassured by. Prior to Hitec's involvement, distribution of this financial information was in the form of paper printouts of tabulations from the SCC's Educational Department Finance Unit.

Printouts relevant to each school would be posted out on a monthly basis, while a file copy was retained within the department. The logistics of such an operation were having an impact on both the schools and the Education Department. The schools were often receiving a bulky and unwieldy hard copy that was difficult to work with, while the Education Department was generating some 500,000 sheets of paper a year. The cost of printing, distribution and internal storage of this information alone was causing concern for Dave Cheeseman, Principal Education Officer.

Following a visit to a trade show, Dave and his colleagues met with Hitec and were able to see the advances in technology that could potentially relieve the problems of distributing critical information. As a consequence a tender was issued which Hitec along with a number of other solution providers responded to. Following an extensive process of evaluation, Hitec's DataStore solution provided the best value option as Dave Cheeseman explains,

"An immediate advantage of the original DataStore system was that we could reclaim office space that had previously been used for paper storage and distribution, replacing it with RAID and optical storage. If our support staff received a query from a school relating to a paper based tabulation, they could instantly access the DataStore system and locate the queried item in question and solve the problem."

"That in itself reduced the volume of paper" continues Dave, **"but the next step for us was to try and get rid of paper altogether. With the help of Hitec, we created**



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Excel files, which contained the tabulations that were then emailed to each school. Using "cut and paste" the schools were then able to import the data into their own spreadsheets with no human error which some of the larger schools thought was brilliant. However some of the smaller schools still preferred the 'comfort blanket' of paper and preferred to print out the spreadsheets. It was from this feedback that we realised there was a problem with printing as these tabulations were not really designed to be printed off."

In the meantime, Hitec had developed a Browser version of DataStore, which in the words of Dave Cheeseman, "seemed too good to be true." The new 32-bit Browser based version of DataStore was immediately taken up by SCC and offered to schools so that instead of awaiting the arrival of an email containing their tabulations, they can securely log on to the SCC Intranet and access their own financial information within seconds of it being uploaded from the Education Department. As a result of funding from the National Grid for Learning, SCC ensured that as well as equipping classes with the requisite infrastructure and technology, the authority had also made sure that the schools' offices had the appropriate equipment to handle this type of communication. No additional hardware is required as all the schools need is a browser and Internet access.

Dave Cheeseman explains, "Our new Director of Education is very keen that the Intranet becomes the major means of communicating with schools and consequently we have built the DataStore system into the Finance Zone on our Intranet. There have been tremendous spin-offs as it is now a requirement for schools to use the Intranet to access their tabulations. The new system has become something of a Trojan Horse in that by using this technology, the schools can now see other services provided by the authority can be accessed in this way and thus reduce the mounds of paper that a local authority produces.

We believe that once a school becomes familiar with Intranet technology then there will be no need to print out a large number of documents, they will merely be routed using the schools' own internal networks. In the unlikely event of the Intranet going down, Hitec has written a special 'belt and braces' utility which enables the DataStore output to be printed and

circulated in the traditional method "

Dave Cheeseman continues, "We have found DataStore to be a really intuitive system and to date we have rolled it out to 100 schools with the remainder coming on board by the end of this year. To introduce schools to the system we didn't feel the need to enrol them into training courses although we have a continuous process of training school staff, we merely sent out a booklet containing some screen grabs and some simple explanatory text. As a result we have received very few queries and those we have had, merely relate to infrastructure issues as opposed to DataStore. We are seeing significant savings in processing time now that the schools are empowered to collect the information when they need it. The feedback has been very positive and it has encouraged us to continue the roll out to the remaining schools."

Future developments within Education Services include the use of overlays and electronic 'rubber stamps' on documents, which will enable the department to remotely monitor tabulations that have been reconciled by the schools. It will allow both SCC and the schools to pre-empt any potential problems. The overlays will also improve the look and feel of documents uploaded by Education Services so that a 'non-finance' person can easily digest the information contained therein. "It's been an extremely fruitful partnership," concludes Dave Cheeseman.

"We've had a tremendous and positive response from our Hitec account manager and Hitec has been great value for money especially when we have achieved so much despite being one of the poorest funded Local Education Authorities. This means we are constantly looking for imaginative and cost-effective ways of making sure we get value for money and certainly the Hitec solution gives us just that."

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