

Outsourcing Email and Data Storage

Case studies



A Big Test for Google
Leeds Metropolitan University

Introduction

Leeds Metropolitan, in looking for an email solution for over thirty thousand students, decided that the only real possibility for them was to have the service outsourced to Google Mail.

Leeds Metropolitan University is one of the largest universities in the country with around 30,000 students and 3,000 staff. The university is based around two very different learning environments in Leeds, with a campus in the world famous sporting area of Headingley and one intertwined with the business, health, civic and entertainment quarters of Leeds.

The university has also developed partnerships with twenty four partner colleges across the North of England. Over 400,000 students are enabling Leeds Metropolitan to create the equivalent of a major American state university system, which they term a Great North Uni.

In July 2007 it was apparent that the student email system at the University was not meeting the needs of the students who used it. Many of the students used external third party systems and as a result many messages from the University were not getting through.

Having identified the need and assessed the user requirements it was decided that it would make business sense to outsource student email to the Google Mail service.

Within the whole process it was made clear that staff email was to remain an institutionally provided in-house service, this was due to the need to retain staff communications on a University owned server. This may have been possible with an outsourced service, but the costs would have been similar to providing an in-house solution.

Following legal advice and setting the specifications, the University was ready to pilot the service with students. The pilot went live in February 2008, after four weeks over 3,000 student accounts were in use.

From September 2008, all 30,000 students across the University will have Google Mail accounts.

Description of outsourced activity

In July 2007 it was apparent that the student email system at Leeds Metropolitan University was not meeting the needs of the students who were using it. The email system was considered to be an important core of the University's communication strategy between the University and the students, an important medium that allowed both academic and administrative staff to communicate directly with students quickly and easily.

With a small amount of disk space allowed per user, many of the students were using external third party systems which often allowed the user gigabytes of storage, calendars, task lists, and online office applications. Many students were avoiding using the University email account as their main or primary email account as they knew it would be deleted when they left the institution. Many of these did not configure their University account to forward to their primary email account and as a result many messages from the University were not getting through, or if they were accessed the messages were often late.

It was evident that the existing student email system was not going to meet the needs of current and future students and was originally designed at a time when few students had email or even internet connectivity.

Students had an ever growing demand for disk space, fuelled by the use of digital photographs, digital video, online and digital resources and electronic submission of assignments.

The University identified a need for a new email system for the students as the system they had in place was not going to meet the needs of the current students.

How long it took from start to full implementation

The whole process from the initial review to implementation of the pilot email system for students took just over six months.

The first task was to work with stakeholders to determine what the student body's requirements were for a University email account. This was undertaken with groups of students, informal student feedback, academic, administrative and technical staff. Working with the different stakeholders allowed the University to identify the requirements for a new email system.

The University looked at the market and what was being offered to institutions in the UK. Unlike the US there were very few options available. As far as Leeds Metropolitan could see only one product met their requirements and that was Google Mail.

Google, in addition to email, offered much more for the user, including calendars, chat and collaborative tools. Google was also constantly improving their offering which would result in a further enhanced and enriched experience for the students studying at Leeds Metropolitan.

With such a large project, 30,000 prospective users, it was vital that there was a dialogue between Google and the University. The project was not only going to help the University, but such a large-scale implementation would be a real test for Google's infrastructure. It was an indicator of the cultural fit with Leeds Metropolitan and Google that both organisations talked and listened.

Ensuring that all possible legal avenues were covered was the next stage. There were no major issues, however this process did take time and was probably the most costly aspect of the whole project. Legal issues needed to be carefully considered to ensure that the University was not in breach of the Data Protection Act and that Safe Harbour principles were in place to reduce or eliminate the University's liability from possible misuse of email by students.

By November 2007 the specification has been written and the business case outlined. It was signed off by the Senior Executive at the University and the service was ready to be launched as a pilot in the early part of 2008.

The pilot went live in February 2008 and after just four weeks over 3,000 students had registered for the service. This exceeded the initial expectations for the pilot, so the University stopped advertising the service, though if students wanted to sign up for the service they could.

The project was reviewed and evaluated over the rest of the academic year and it was judged to be a success by all the stakeholders.

Over the summer of 2008, 30,000 accounts were created in preparation for allocating every student at Leeds Metropolitan a Google email account in September 2008.



Strategic aim

The key aim of outsourcing the student email was to improve the student experience at the University. Email was a core element of the support of the student's studies and in communication.

Business case

The key business issue was in relation to the student experience and ensuring that any email system would meet the needs of students. The University needed to identify what were the needs of the students in relation to the provision of email?

There were other business drivers, cost savings for example. Though procuring a free service is not free of costs, they are significantly lower than providing the service itself. The cost of using Google Mail was considerably less than if the University providing its own implementation. There would be further cost savings in the administration of the outsourced system as well.

Issues

One of the key technical advantages is that much of the administration in running an email service for students is passed onto Google and not done by the University.

What are the main advantages to the institution in this outsourcing activity?

- An enhanced student experience in using email and communicating with the University
- A lower cost solution

What are the main challenges to the institution in this outsourcing activity?

The biggest challenge was the size of the project. With 30,000 students it was essential that Google was on board as it was going to test their infrastructure in new ways.

Student experience

The benefits for the students were:

- A large online storage area; with a provision of 6GB per student, it was evident that this was vastly superior to the previous provision of 20MB. It would enable students to store many more emails and to also safely store large files online
- It was going to be more than just email, the student would have access to the full range of Google applications and services
- Their data was in the 'cloud', meaning they could access their data whilst at University, at home, in the workplace, on the move; wherever there was a connection to the internet
- Having left Leeds Metropolitan they would retain their email – in other words email for life, or as long as they wanted to use it for

Lessons learned

Think about the student experience, don't think of the technical reasons when making a choice about outsourcing student email.

Find out how your students use email and data storage.

Work with the provider so ensure a smooth transition and ensure that the influx of students in the Autumn does not cause problems for either party.

Contact details

Hugh Lavery

Director of Information, Media and Technology Services - Learning and Information Services

h.lavery@leedsmet.ac.uk

Leeds Metropolitan University

Civic Quarter

Leeds

LS1 3HE

+44 (0)113 812 0000

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Leeds Metropolitan University

Further information about JISC:

Web: www.jisc.ac.uk

Email: info@jisc.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0)117 33 10789

Further information about UCISA:

Web: www.ucisa.ac.uk

Email: admin@ucisa.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1865 283425