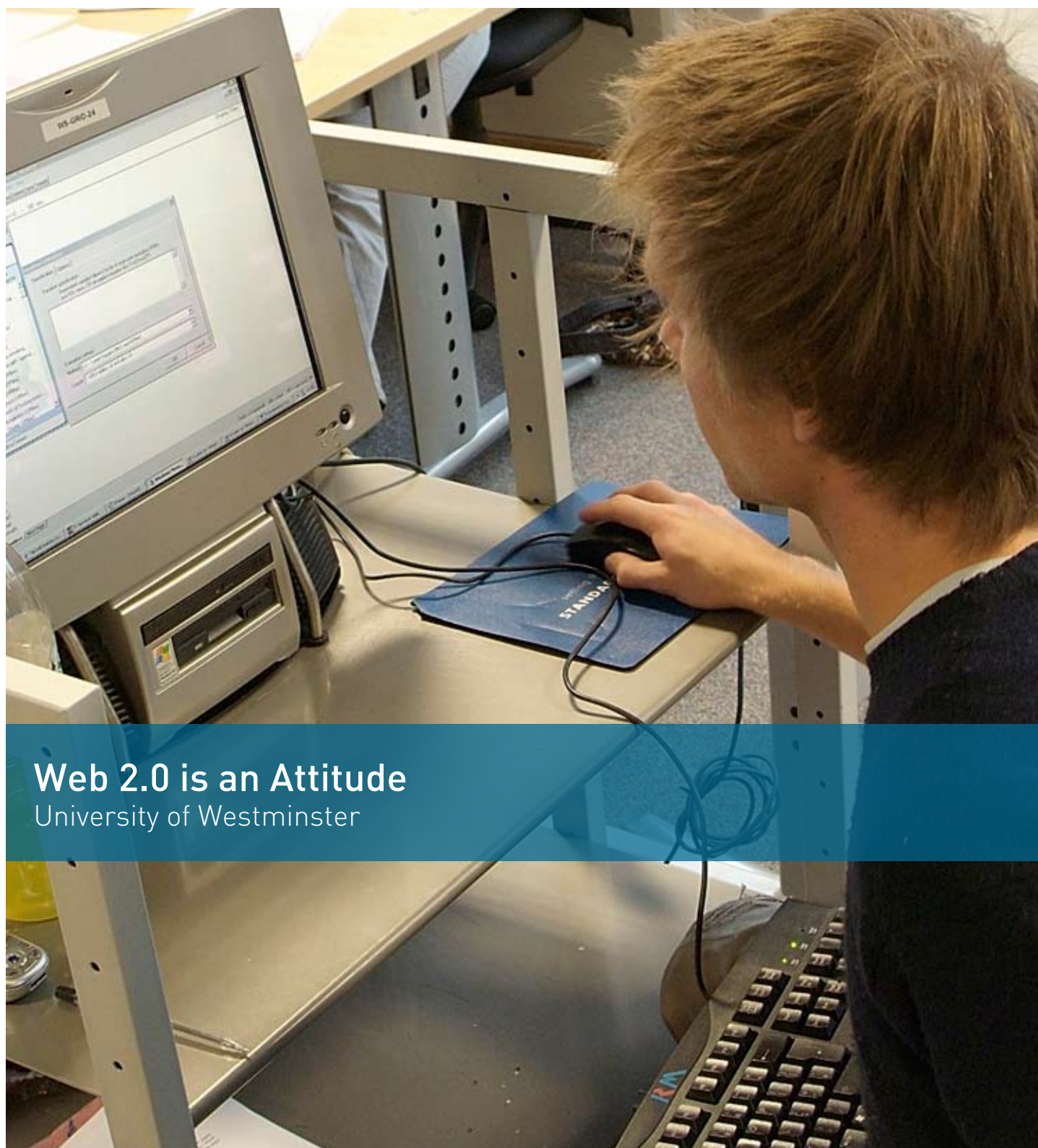


Outsourcing Email and Data Storage

Case studies



Web 2.0 is an Attitude

University of Westminster



Introduction

The University of Westminster in outsourcing student email and data storage concluded that Web 2.0 is as much an attitude as any technical standard.

The University of Westminster was founded in 1838 as the Polytechnic Institution, Britain's first such educational institution. It became the University of Westminster in 1993. It has more than 22,000 students, of whom 5,500 are postgraduates.

The existing student email service which had served the University well for many years was starting to look dated and 96% of students were automatically forwarding email away from their University account to an external third party.

In 2007 following success in the US and in the UK both Microsoft and Google started actively courting the HE sector in providing free student email. Following a presentation at UCISA in the Spring of 2008, the University decided that this was a serious option requiring further consideration whether it would be feasible and possible for the provision of free email and data storage from a third party provider.

Sandboxed or closed pilot solutions were setup for testing, evaluation and user consultation. By July 2008 the technical work was completed and the roll-out planned. Google email, calendars and documents were launched with the freshers in October, and December 2008 will see the roll-out for all students.

Description of outsourced activity

There is an ever growing demand from students for disk space, fuelled by the use of digital photographs, digital video, online resources, podcasting and electronic submission of assignments.

It was evident that the existing student email system was not going to meet the needs of current and future students and was a solution appropriate for a time when students had much less familiarity with consumer level email or even internet connectivity.

Surveys showed that 96% of students did not use the University email system. This posed the real danger that important, urgent and key emails from the University were not getting through to the students. One of the problems the University faced with students forwarding their emails was that many all-user emails were seen by online services as spam, bogus or rogue messages and faced being blocked or bounced. There were frequent occasions

where the University email account would find itself black-listed – this led to short loss of service incidents as the University technical staff contacted the service providers to get the block lifted (other universities have indicated 17% of emails are lost because of this problem). This was a key issue for the University as the importance of email as an official communication grew.

Storage issues on network servers and on email meant that students were, more often than not, saving their work to USB memory sticks. As everyone knows this solution is problematic with the memory sticks too easily mislaid and without adequate backups many hours of student work could be lost forever. Also the team learnt after the decision to move had been made, the Student Union were looking to launch a campaign for an email service which provided adequate online storage and was 'fit for purpose'.

In 2007 both Microsoft and Google started actively courting the higher education (HE) sector in providing free student email. Following a presentation at the UCISA conference in Spring 2008, the University decided that this was a viable option and the go-ahead was given to outsource the service to a third party which would provide free email and data storage for the students. In discounting an in-house solution it was calculated that the purchase cost of hosting 7GB of storage for 22,000 accounts would be close to £1,000,000. It was key that the outsourcing of any service would need to result in a better and enhanced experience for students.

The University assessed the fit of the proposal with the University Information Strategy as is the case with the introduction of any new service. When they scored the proposal against the strategic objectives contained in the University Information Strategy, the use of Google demonstrated over two thirds of the strategic objectives in one project; it was at this point that they knew they were onto a winning formula. After one meeting with Google it was apparent that outsourcing email and storage provision for learners was not only viable and feasible, but would in fact result in a better service and experience for students. The decision to choose between Microsoft and Google was never going to be a purely technical decision, but a decision based on fulfilling the needs of the user. Two domains were setup for the evaluation and decision making teams. Because both options were externally hosted this did not require internal investment and allowed real and wide exposure to the solutions on offer.

The provision of the service had to go through the proper committee structure of the University. Various university committees were involved in the process and across the membership on those committees their views were split down the middle; half the staff favoured the Google solution and half favoured the Microsoft solution. However when students were asked (through the Student Union) they voted overwhelmingly for Google. For the University, ensuring that the Student Union was on board was key to a successful implementation. The project team launched the project with the tag-line 'We asked. You said. We did.'

By July 2008, the technical work was completed and the work started on how the service would be rolled out. Google email, calendars and documents were launched with the freshers in October, and December 2008 will see the completion of roll-out for all students. As Google release new services and applications these will be added to the service provided to the students. To accommodate the 'constant beta' approach of ever changing capabilities the implementation team have developed a novel approach of a year long campaign, promoting the service through competitions encouraging development of the Google Apps environment by students through Google gadgets, themes and RSS feeds.

Strategic aim

The key strategic aim behind the decision to outsource was to provide an enhanced and fit for purpose service for basic email services for students. By adopting an outsourced commercial service the university also inherited a rich platform for learners in the new era of Web 2.0 services and applications.

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.

There were the two main questions that in the process of procuring the student email needed to be asked:

- What were the needs of the students in relation to email and data storage?
- What were the needs of the University in relation to the provision of student email?

Alongside, the University needed to know how it would fit into the institutional IT strategy.

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 the University providing their own implementation (it was estimated that providing the equivalent storage on offer on internal systems would cost around £1,000,000).

However it should be made clear that though substantial cost savings were made, these were not the main business drivers in pushing through the new email system. The main consideration was the student experience.

The provision of 6GB of storage would mean the (potential) end of the use of USB memory sticks as students would have plenty of storage space online to store their files. The spam issue associated with sending all-user emails would no longer be a problem. The frequency of email that had 'never arrived' would reduce as the University could now guarantee closer to 100% of email would be delivered. The University also took the decision to use friendly names for email rather than use the traditional student ID number.

The University now had the basis to offer a University email address well beyond graduation. The benefit to the student was that after graduation they could continue to use their University email account, and significantly retain those of their friends. This would develop the pattern of use whilst at the University and extend to other online services such as online banking, online shopping, forums, Web 2.0 sites and other web services. In addition students would retain access to their university work stored online in Google Docs.

Lastly the email service is 'mobile ready'. Mobile internet devices such as the iPod touch, the iPhone and the forthcoming Google G1 mobile phone provide a very low energy method of keeping in touch.

Issues

In providing such facilities to the student population the University expect the question from their academic and support staff – what about me? Currently staff are provided with an in-house Exchange hosted service with only 500MB available on their email accounts – much less than provided to students. The University decided not to move everyone to the outsourced solution. What would the University do about long term email archiving and storage issues? Unlike most of their undergraduates who only stayed three years, staff would normally be at the University longer and as a result would have larger and older archives. How would these be archived and stored?

Then there were the legal issues, in revising the University policies the University stipulates that all IPR, teaching, assessment, regulatory and legal information has to be mastered on University owned equipment. So unless the Google email environment can synchronise through to University servers, staff email will stay on University systems.

Having gone through that process, there were still advantages of using Google Apps for collaboration, therefore the conclusion was that whilst collaborative activity can be anywhere, but the final output must be held on University servers. With the wide ranging export functionality available on Google Apps it would be easy for collaborative teams to save documents in a suitable format on the University systems.

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
- An immediate and easy entry into Web 2.0 and cloud computing fully integrated with University systems and user identities

There is a world of difference between teaching reluctant students how to use proprietary systems and sharing 'cool tricks' on technology they already know

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

As IT becomes consumer and commodity led the decision-making should pass back to the user community. Decisions should not be based on technical grounds alone.

Examine the impact on outsourcing key services on other services. Perhaps 12 months ago we were struggling to afford and implement an in-house proprietary portal solution, increasingly consumer products such as iGoogle could be the new choice.

Student experience

The benefits for the students were:

- A large online storage area; with a provision of 6GB per student. This enables students to store many more emails and to also safely store large files online
- It was going to be more than email, the student would have a whole range of Web 2.0 enabled online services with more new services coming on stream in the future
- A place where they, too, can contribute to the information environment of the University

Lessons learned

As technology gets better and becomes a consumer/commodity offering, it is important to bring the users back into the decision making process.

Form policy from where you actually are rather than where you think you are. With 96% of student email already beyond the purview of the University even the restricted access provided in an outsourcing arrangement was a significant improvement.

Encourage innovation in the use of system.

Handle the beta mentality – expect things to change, ask not how you can control change but how will you respond to it.

Web 2.0 is as much an attitude as any technical standard.

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