Timing ICT Projects
It's a bit like giving a teenage boy too much time to do an assignment!
by Brett North, National Manager - Operations & Services, Computelec

You'll be familiar with the theory that it doesn't matter how much time you give a teenage boy to do an assignment, they'll still do it on the last night before it's due. By that time they'll have all their motivations lined up: encouraging (nagging) teachers and, most importantly, other students (girls!) who've already done it and can furnish advice!

Perhaps we can learn from this with IT projects: timing is everything. You need to do them, not when everyone else does them, but when all the elements line up for the best outcome.

Myth #1: "We have to wait until the holidays!"

Traditionally, school IT teams stage IT projects over the school holidays. It seems so very logical: your systems are least in use, there are less people around to distract you and time to iron out any issues. But perhaps by first looking at how you're going to implement, your chances of success for an early (in-term) and more efficient rollout might just increase. When you have a significant IT project coming up – whether an upgrade of your existing infrastructure or a new development – you have a clear choice between:

1. Accomplishing it yourself using your in-house team, or
2. Using expert external resources to augment or manage the project

If you want to accomplish the project in-house, you'll most likely need to wait for the next mid-term break – or even the long summer holidays – because your own team will simply not have the bandwidth to accomplish the project while they're also supporting students and staff with day-to-day requests and issues.

Many schools, when deciding to get outside help for their ICT projects, assume that these projects must also be conducted during the holidays – but, in the vast majority of cases, this is simply not a factor. In fact, given this mindset, the best service providers – those who specialise in school ICT – may be 'booked out' during school breaks. So, if you want to advance your project to deliver its benefits sooner, staging it during term-time is often your best option.

> " By working closely with Computelec engineers we were able to successfully migrate our network and server environment to a new and more flexible platform during the school term. Outages were planned carefully and carried out outside of school hours. "
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> Bassam Farache
> Network Manager,
> East Preston Islamic College

Myth #2: "Change during term-time is risky!"

Many IT teams we work with have initial concerns about the risks involved in changing their school's ICT environment during term-time – in case application or network access for students and staff are disrupted at the time when they need them most.

In reality, few projects – however complex – require downtime of existing services for more than a few hours or a day or so, and an education-focussed ICT provider is sympathetic to the school timetable. Activities such as taking a server, application or network down to make essential changes can be done after 4:00pm on weeknights or over weekends. This means that – apart from advising any staff members potentially affected that you are briefly conducting a system upgrade or maintenance for their benefit – you should not be letting anyone down, or impacting your school's operations in any real way.

In fact, we estimate that 80-90% of elapsed time in the ICT projects we deliver can easily be conducted during school hours and, because we specialise in education IT, our staff are well used to carrying out the remaining 10-20% of these projects outside school hours during term-time.

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So, when is the best time for school ICT projects?

It's when the right expertise is available and the working knowledge accessible. It's when the motivation to get it done is at its peak (just like the teenage boy) because the environment demands it. It is also when end users are on site and can progressively test and review it. The 'big bang' approach of releasing new technology at the start of a new term is often too much change in one hit and not always the best start when multiple other new initiatives are also about to commence.

Consider bringing an ICT project forward, instead of waiting for the next break to:

- Advance the implementation of new applications and services so they can be enjoyed this term
- Improve service performance and delivery to your school community – now
- Enhance quality by conducting your project when all of your staff and important stakeholders are 'on deck' to test the results and overcome any issues in real-time
- Achieve return on your technology investments without delay

Let's learn from the much maligned teenage boy... they might just be onto something!

About the author
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