



Overview

Country or Region: United Kingdom
Industry: Education

Customer Profile

LSSG was officially launched in July 2007 as a soft federation of seven schools in the Lincoln Area. The main objective of the federation is to share educational experiences that would be enhanced by the seven schools working together.

Situation

LSSG needed a collaboration environment to link students and instructors among the seven separate schools—but the seven separate IT departments had conflicting priorities.

Solution

LSSG turned to the F1 Group, based in Lincoln, which showed LSSG how the Business Productivity Online Suite from Microsoft Online Services could meet its needs quickly and cost-effectively.

Benefits

- Rapid deployment
- Low monthly subscription fee
- Ease of collaboration among students and schools

Online Services Facilitates Delivery of Courses Across Seven Separate Schools

“Once we realized that we could add the Business Productivity Online Suite without causing problems for the seven existing IT infrastructures, it became obvious that this was the solution we needed.”

Keith Elms, Head of LSSG

The secondary student population is declining in the rural county of Lincolnshire in the United Kingdom, and that has made it impractical for many local secondary schools to justify the cost of delivering specialized courses that otherwise might have been available to students. A soft federation of seven of these secondary schools, however, has come together to share resources in an effort to find ways to offer these specialized classes to interested students. Working with the F1 Group, using a high definition videoconferencing system, and a federation-wide collaboration environment based on the Business Productivity Online Suite from Microsoft® Online Services, the Lincoln Specialist Schools Group (LSSG) has found a cost-justifiable way to offer these specialized courses to students whose educational opportunities would otherwise have been more limited.

Microsoft®
Online Services

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Situation

The area around the city of Lincoln is rural, and it is one of the few areas in the United Kingdom where pockets of the student population are in decline. This decline in student population was making it increasingly difficult for individual secondary schools to offer advanced and specialized courses—such as law or advanced mathematics—in a traditional classroom setting. Within a given school perhaps only five or six students would want to take these specialized courses, and that made it impossible to justify the cost a tutor for each school.

For this reason, seven schools in the Lincoln area—including Branston Community College, Cherry Willingham Community School, Lincoln Christ’s Hospital School, North Kesteven School, Robert Pattinson School, St Peter’s and Paul’s Catholic High School, and Yarborough High School—formed a soft federation called the Lincoln Specialist Schools Group (LSSG). The main objective of the federation is to share educational experiences that would be enhanced by the seven schools working together.

By working together in this way, the schools in the LSSG can pool their students. Across the seven schools, for example, there might be 30 or more students interested in taking a given advanced class, and that level of interest is enough to justify hiring an instructor and offering the specialized course. The challenge, then, lay in bringing together the interested students from the geographically separate schools.

In July 2008 LSSG received funding to develop a virtual education environment that would span all seven schools. Each school installed high definition video conferencing hardware that would enable a

single tutor to teach a course in which students could participate from their separate schools. They would not have to travel at all to join the class. Each school also began to install software that would enable students in the different locations to collaborate in real time.

However, because each school has its own IT department and priorities, the deployment of the collaboration software was encountering delays and complications, and that was holding up the creation of the virtual learning environment that LSSG officials had envisioned. Officials of LSSG contacted the F1 Group in Lincoln, which has a strong reputation in the area of being both technically competent and understanding the needs of the education community. Consultants from the F1 Group examined the situation at LSSG and proposed a new approach to creating a group-wide collaboration environment—one built around the Business Productivity Online Suite from Microsoft Online Services.

Solution

The Business Productivity Online Suite from Microsoft Online Services enables LSSG to gain access to a full range of enterprise-class messaging and collaboration services without having to procure or maintain an in-house infrastructure for those services. Microsoft Online Services enables access to collaboration tools and shared workspaces, workflow, desktop and mobile e-mail, calendaring and contacts, instant messaging, presence, audio/video conferencing, and web conferencing. Yet because the applications supporting these services—including Microsoft SharePoint® Online, Microsoft Exchange Online, Microsoft Office Live Meeting, and Microsoft Office Communications Online—run on servers residing in state-of-the-art Microsoft data centers, none of the schools

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using these services need to invest in on-premises infrastructure to take advantage of these services. None of the schools’ IT departments need to set up or maintain these services.

Indeed, Microsoft Online Services hosts and maintains the servers supporting the Business Productivity Online Suite with its own staff of hardware and software experts. It supplies patches and security updates in real time, and guarantees 99.9 percent uptime with a financially-backed SLA so LSSG always has access to the latest, most up-to-date versions of the applications to which it subscribes.

Pay as You Go

The cost of the solution fits neatly into the schools’ budgets, too. Instead of having to purchase separate server and client licenses for infrastructure components such as Microsoft Office SharePoint Server or Microsoft Exchange Server, LSSG simply subscribes to the applications its students and instructors need on a per-user, per-month basis. This eliminates up-front licensing costs and enables LSSG to cover the nominal expense of accessing these services using operational rather than capital budgets.

The F1 Group helps LSSG overcome other challenges, also. By assuming responsibility for the deployment and customization of the Business Productivity Online Suite and lifting that responsibility from the shoulders of the different schools’ IT departments, the F1 Group has been able to create a consistent solution that students and instructors at all the schools can use. It has also been able to deliver a solution that met the deadlines of the entire group. Moreover, because the F1 Group can offer additional training, customized coding, SharePoint Online application development, and many other services

related to the capabilities of the Business Productivity Online Suite, LSSG can use the F1 Group as a single point of contact that can deliver cluster-wide services and enhancements. Were it to have to negotiate tasks and prioritize schedules with seven different IT departments, much more work would be involved and such services and enhancements might be very slow in coming.

“F1 introduced us to the Business Productivity Online Suite,” says Keith Elms, Head of LSSG. “We were unaware of it beforehand. Once we realized that we could add the Business Productivity Online Suite without causing problems for seven existing IT infrastructures, it became obvious that this was the solution we needed.”

Benefits

Using the collaboration features of Business Productivity Online Suite, LSSG is now able to deliver advanced and specialty courses to students at seven different schools, courses that none of the individual schools in the group could otherwise have justified delivering. A single tutor can deliver a class in law or advanced math, and interested students at each school can participate from their own school facilities. With the high definition video cameras set up in the different schools, the students and the tutor can see one another—so the tutor can always see the expressions on the students’ faces and see whether they appear to be understanding the lesson. Course materials and assignments are available in a SharePoint Online library, as are recorded copies of the lessons delivered over the videoconferencing link—so students at all seven schools have instant access to all the information.

During a class, Office Live Meeting connects the electronic white boards in

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each classroom so that whatever a tutor writes on the whiteboard in his or her location shows up on the whiteboard in the connected classrooms in each of the seven schools for the students working in those locations. Students can interact with the instructor using Live Meeting too, to sketch an idea on the white board for an instructor to review or to deliver a presentation for all the class to see.

Expanding the Reach of Educators

Both students and tutors are enthusiastic about the experience. There have been no technical challenges since The F1 Group deployed the solution, and uptime and availability have ensured the ongoing ability to deliver the classes as envisioned.

“If the technology does not work, our teachers cannot teach and our students would not receive the standard of education they would expect and deserve,” says Elms. “We looked at availability and service levels as part of our investigation at the proof of concept stage. It was paramount that this be a reliable and secure environment.”

Increasing IT Efficiency

“There were many reasons to choose the F1 Group to support our collaboration efforts,” says Elms, “the main one being that they understood what we were trying to achieve, not just technically but educationally and politically as well. Being a technology company, the F1 Group came up with a solution that not only gave us the solution we wanted, but also came up with the least disruptive implementation, which was the Business Productivity Online Suite. This means we could go live within the strict timeframes we had set ourselves.

“The F1 Group really understood what we were looking to achieve from a teaching perspective,” Elms goes on to say, “and

they have worked closely with us to make this project a success. They took on the role of technology lead on behalf of the project and were one of the key elements in the successful delivery of this project. They managed the whole experience, and they delivered in a lot less time than I had imagined possible. The F1 Group even managed the physical installation of new videoconferencing classrooms at each of our sites, delivering the complete solution on time and on budget across all seven sites.”

The bottom line? With the Business Productivity Online Suite and support from the F1 Group, the students at LSSG are able to take courses that they would not otherwise have been able to take. That provides opportunities for greater educational enrichment and experiences that may make a huge difference in the lives of these students and the community.

For More Information

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For more information about F1 Group products and services, call +44 845 855 0000 or visit the web site at: www.f1g.co.uk

Microsoft Online Services

Microsoft Online Services are business-class communication and collaboration solutions delivered as a subscription service and hosted by Microsoft. These offerings help make it easier for customers to rapidly and cost-effectively access the most up-to-date technologies, and are designed for rapid deployment to provide customers with streamlined communications, simplified management, and business-class reliability and security features.

For IT staffers, Microsoft Online Services help reduce the burden of performing routine IT management tasks such as installation, provisioning, ongoing maintenance, updates, and upgrades, making it possible for them to spend more time on initiatives that move the business forward. The Online offerings are backed by strong service level agreements and are designed to meet the regulatory compliance and reliability needs of enterprise customers. On a technical level, the offerings boast the sophistication and reliability that customers expect from Microsoft, which continues to invest heavily in building data centers to support the Online family of services.

For more information, visit: www.microsoft.com/online

Software and Services

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