SIX MONEY-SAVING TIPS FOR SMARTER EDTECH

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Building an effective digital strategy is not always easy for cash-strapped schools, but Al Kingsley, MD of NetSupport and Chair of a multi-acadmey trust, shares some words of advice.

Budget will always be a sticking point for schools wishing to realise ambitious edtech plans. This year, BESA (British Educational Suppliers Association) reported that the biggest challenge for secondary schools, when it comes to ICT, is securing funds.

I'm not surprised. School leaders are under increasing pressure to do more while spending less. While well-managed deployments of technology can help to achieve this, there are numerous ways schools can make sure they are squeezing every drop of value from their investment in edtech.

The starting point for any school setting out to save money with smart edtech must be to have a digital strategy in place. Simply put, this is a plan of what you want to achieve and why – and how you will get there. Importantly, it considers your school's needs now and in the future, so that what is spent today has a sustainable impact for years to come.

Before anything else, forget budget and focus on strategy

While there are practical tips and tools that can be employed to cut the day-to-day costs of running school technology, the only real way to ensure the greatest return on investment is to treat edtech as a long-term strategy, rather than a series of short-term wins.

In too many schools, the driver for implementing new technology is often determined by budget, with the finance team saying: "We only have £10k to spend, what are you going to do?". The piecemeal approach that results from this is uneconomic and wastes precious resources. So, to support schools as they plan the management of their technology, I've worked together with ICT Evangelist Mark Anderson to create A Guide to Creating a Digital Strategy in Education; a free resource any school can use to lay the tracks of a successful edtech strategy.

Upcycle unused devices

Before embarking on any spending, at the start of your digital strategy it's a good idea to undertake a thorough audit of your existing assets to explore what you have and how it's being used. Then, you can decide whether items can be upgraded or redeployed, rather than replaced. As an example, one of our customers, an IT Manager at a Primary Multi Academy Trust, recalls one primary school finding ten aging laptops in a storeroom. Instead of replacing them at a cost of around £2,500, they upgraded them to SSD hard disks at a tenth of that amount. They were subsequently put to good use in an intervention room where they are used to aid children's research.

Cut software costs

Software is the backbone of many schools' day-to-day running. Some systems will remain essential, but others will fall by the wayside as times and needs change. Does your school have visibility of which software licences are being renewed automatically, despite being unused? Keeping track of your installed licences can help to reduce unnecessary expenditure on renewing ones that are simply not needed. There are tools available to help manage this cycle which you can consider as part of your ongoing strategy.

Time is money

Helping IT teams work proactively to maintain a schools network can save money by preventing extended periods of downtime due to IT issues. There are technicians' tools that can proactively alert to any changes to devices or the network – and it's precisely by being notified of these smaller issues that allows them to take action to stop them from escalating into larger problems, resulting in wasted time for teachers, students and support staff. The time freed up by not having to deal with complications reactively can be used more productively – and economically.

Power down energy costs

Did you know that a standard PC left on continuously consumes more than 500kWh per year? Based on just ten PCs, this equates to over £700. So it makes sense to use energy monitoring tools to keep you informed of how many PCs are left on out of hours – and, most importantly, how the costs of this can significantly add up. Then you can implement power management policies to power off selected PCs automatically at the end of the day – and then back on (all at once, or in stages) the next morning. In addition, you can use "inactivity policies"; allowing rules to be applied for systems to sleep, log out or power down if they have been inactive, to help deliver further savings for your school.

Print Savings

In an average sized school, the cost of student printing alone is estimated to cost £150,000 per year. Unnecessary printing can often spiral out of control, incurring high paper and toner costs. By using print monitoring tools, you can see exactly where costs are being generated and make adjustments, such as reducing the number of printers available for student use, setting print limits, preventing duplicates being printed, and so on.

Remember, investing in educational technology without a defined digital strategy is rather like relying on your sat nav for directions without first entering the destination. You can keep on driving, but you're unlikely to end up at the right location. Devising and implementing a digital strategy certainly requires concerted effort; however, like so many challenges, once the first steps are taken, the dividends become obvious – with cost savings being just one measurement of your success.