HOW CAN SCHOOL LEADERS HARNESS THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF EDTECH?

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According to the University of Birmingham, 90% of UK secondary schools say they have a duty to prepare their students for a digital future, but almost two-thirds of leadership teams feel that they do not have the detailed knowledge needed to navigate the complexities of driving digital learning forward.

While some schools are making fantastic use of edtech, it's clear however that digital strategy is still not garnering prime place at leadership's table. In my experience working with schools to plan and implement technology solutions, it is often the case that a piecemeal approach is taken which as often leads to disappointment. However, if schools want to gain from impactful edtech now, and in the future, it's essential they determine a strategy to do so. Without a digital strategy, a school's approach to edtech is a little like a runaway train, about to topple off the tracks, and destined for disappointment and wasted resources.

That is why, alongside ICT Evangelist Mark Anderson (former school leader and renowned advocate for the purposeful use of technology linked to pedagogy), we've launched A Guide to Creating a Digital Strategy in Education, a resource any school can use to lay the tracks of a successful edtech strategy.

Understanding clearly what's needed

In lots of schools, the driver for implementing new technology is often determined by the finance team saying: "We only have £10k to spend, what are you going to do?" but any decision needs to consider what it

means for infrastructure, support services, refresh cycles, teacher training, licensing and, of course, how impact will be measured.

Before any school gets to the point of testing, trialling or buying new technology, the starting point is to have a digital strategy; a plan of what you want to achieve and why. First and foremost, a digital strategy should be led by teachers and senior leaders in terms of outcomes – and secondly, it should tally with the finance and budgetary opportunities of the school. A 2015 survey in conjunction with the ISC Digital Strategy Group found that the key goals schools were seeking to achieve through edtech were:

- Enhance learning outcomes
- Increased staff, student and parental engagement
- Implement collaborative technologies
- Promote digital wellbeing
- Implement unified and integrated technologies
- Technology refresh
- Increase attainment
- Implement a data security policy that delivers on both legal and operational requirements
- Achieve better value for money
- Driving efficiencies

These all make sense as long as they are aligned with the school's development plan and current priorities – and the senior leadership team needs to ensure this is the case. As well, it should connect directly with the classroom and how teachers can use technology to enhance teaching and learning. It also involves students, in terms of what the best fit is for the cohort of young people within the school.

Getting practical

The starting point for creating a digital strategy is for school leaders to consider who should be involved as stakeholders. Although it is tempting to identify just one individual to drive forward a school's strategy it is wiser to bring together a team. What's important is that schools need to understand that a digital strategy is not simply the remit of IT. To get to the right destination schools must bring together a much more diverse team, for example:

- Finance is at the heart of any strategy within the school and MAT landscape, but in the context of a digital strategy, it's important to ensure that it is the facilitator and not the driver.

- The SEND team will need to consider whether the digital strategy is broad enough to support the various types of learners who have special needs.

- The Safeguarding team and Designated Safeguarding Lead will need to make sure that any new technology employed does not affect the school's ability to meet its obligations in terms of keeping children safe while using it.

- The IT team will need to ensure it can identify what's needed in terms of infrastructure, delivery of technology, its maintenance and support and what training may be required to ensure sound and solid support. It's also fundamental to consider data protection and security.

- The Governing Body or Board of Trustees will support but also challenge any proposed expenditure, ensuring that the school can measure its impact.

Pulling all these stakeholders together will ensure that the school has a full view of what it wants to achieve. Each stakeholder has a spectrum of considerations and questions that are important to their priorities. Combined, these help a school understand what's needed and to ultimately measure the impact of their long-term goal. This aligns very much with Ofsted's new framework of 'Intention, Implementation and Impact' (known as The Three I's).

Of course, bringing together such varied stakeholders with differing priorities means that there will be challenges in defining and driving forward a digital strategy.

Other than budget and how that might impact the timeline for delivering a digital strategy, the biggest single barrier to successful implementation will be lack of 'buy-in' from staff. Leaders can partially overcome this by clear co-production of the strategy alongside its communication and vision, setting a reasonable level of expectation for staff.

Golden Rules for an effective digital strategy:

What does a clear and communicable strategy look like?

1. Keep it simple – overly complicated strategies offer less flexibility and are more likely to disenfranchise the school community.

2. Be clear on your current starting position and know what does and doesn't work well already.

3. Assign value to current technology on the simple measure of: would anyone notice if it was gone?

4. Consider whether your plan is sustainable (in terms of both time and finance).

5. Ensure true co-production and the broadest possible input (while managing expectations).

6. Factor time and budget to training – it will make or break your success.

7. Seek peer reviews from other schools or professionals who have already been on the journey

There is great potential for edtech to make a positive impact in schools and to help support big issues such as teacher workload. However, understanding the strategic context is absolutely essential. What's encouraging is that this is not complex; it's about leaders ensuring that everyone is on board and heading towards the same destination.