

the soft sell

Procuring education software can be something of a minefield – Ollie Bray suggests five questions you should ask before making any purchase...

1 Do you really need it?

This might sound like a silly suggestion but many schools purchase expensive software because they think they require it when in reality they don't. In fact, I read a study a few years ago suggesting that on average most people only use about 20% of the features of many standard software packages (such as Microsoft Office). When money is tight ask yourself – what do I want the software to do? And is there a free alternative that could be used instead?

2 Will it work on my school computers?

Again this may sound like a common sense observation but lots of school throughout the UK make the mistake of purchasing software that can't run on their school machines. There may be a number of reasons for this, such as the software is not compatible with an establishment's operating system (it may be for Windows only, for example, but the school also uses a lot of OS for Mac devices); it relies on a legacy operating system (perhaps you have just upgraded to Windows 8 but the software you need is only supported for Windows XP and Vista); there is a problem with the hardware specification of your machine (such as the graphics cards not being powerful enough for the software to run); it will not run on a networked machine (it has been built to run on stand alone machines only); or there is not enough bandwidth available (many software packages now run directly from the cloud and are not proprietary on your computer – if you make a cloud based software purchase make sure you have the bandwidth to support it).

Before making any purchase check to make sure that the software you plan to buy is compatible and that any planned upgrades to your system (eg: change of operating system) will not have an impact on your investment.

3 Are there licensing issues?

Always think about and research licensing thoroughly. There are often a number of different licensing models available, some of which can be problematic for schools. For example, a single license may mean that the software can only be used on one computer where a whole-site license means that it can be used on all of the compatible computers in a school. Single licenses are obviously cheaper but not very flexible. Whole site licenses are very flexible but pricy. The best option for schools (in terms of cost and flexibility) is often a license that means a piece of software can be used on any school computer but is restricted to a capped number of simultaneous logins (say, 30 users at a time).

INFO BAR

USEFUL LINKS

OLLIE BRAY -
OLLIEBRAY.COM
 MICROSOFT ENROLMENT
 FOR EDUCATION
 SOLUTIONS (EES) -
GOO.GL/QVDSF
 MICROSOFT HOME USE
 PROGRAMME:
GOO.GL/QKGZ4



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OLLIE BRAY
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4 One-off purchase or a subscription model?

Many software providers these days are moving to subscription models rather than one off licensing purchases. This makes a lot of sense as it allows schools to have the latest most up-to-date software and for suppliers to have a guaranteed income over the life of the subscription. The downside is that the accumulative recurring annual cost (over a number of years) is often greater than the cost of a single license in the past. That said, models like this do allow schools to budget and plan. The important thing here is for you to do your maths, and work out what is better for your school in terms of the product you will get and the cost that you will pay. Also as the purchasing power of Local Authority consortiums becomes less consider joining together with other schools and approaching software companies in small groups – you can often negotiate a deal.

5 Is Open Source really free?

Open Source software (all the way to its core code and any subsequent modifications) is free, yes – but running it is not. In fact Open Source can be very expensive to run as it will require server space, a service level agreement, someone to maintain your install including the running of up-dates, and possibly developer time to customise your installation for your own local needs. There are lots of companies out there who will do this for you but by the time you have paid them it is sometimes better (and a lot less hassle) just to go for the commercial equivalent.

DID YOU KNOW?

Licensing programmes such as Microsoft Enrolment for Education (EES) can bring major benefits for individuals. This particular licensing solution offers a 'single subscription agreement' based on the number of users in the organisation rather than the devices themselves. In being 'licensed users' all of the organisation's staff members can take advantage of the Home Use Programme. This means each licensed member of staff can download or order on CD the very latest Microsoft Office suite (PC or Mac) for use at home at a significant discount to the normal retail price (currently £8.95). The only problem with deals like this is that employers often forget to pass the information on to their employees.