

decisions, decisions

When you're having to make tough choices about ICT procurement, even knowing to whom you should turn for advice can be a potential problem. Luckily, **Ollie Bray** is on hand with some helpful pointers...

When it comes to funding in education we are required more than ever before to make tricky decisions as we try to get the biggest return for the smallest investment – and these dilemmas don't get any more difficult than when they involve IT procurement.

Everyone knows that investment in technology is essential. Indeed, it is so important that I believe that it is only with appropriate spending in this area within our schools and the systems that support them that we will bring the UK out of the education doldrums that it seems to be in at the moment. Wise IT investment will also help us create a future workforce capable of taking on the challenges of the third millennium.

One of the challenges that we face with technology decision-making in our schools is that too often, those who are charged with allocating the budget simply don't have the knowledge and experience to enable them to make informed



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choices. In many cases this means they have to rely on outside experts such as consultants (as the previous expertise found within LA teams has often been dissolved to save money). To make matters worse, and to save money further in harsh financial times, rather than paying for independent consultants schools may tend to opt for consultation provided by the IT industry itself, listening to companies that give their advice for free but then make massive returns in sales having recommended their own products and services.

In this article, I'm looking at three of the most common IT procurement decisions that many schools feel obliged to make at the moment, none of which is as simple as it may first appear. The idea is not to tell you what to do, but to give you a clearer picture of the issues involved, and therefore help you think a little differently – even if that just means giving you a new list of questions to ask your consultant...

DECISION ONE:

INTERACTIVE WHITEBOARDS VS LCD SCREENS

I have never really understood what all the fuss has been about over interactive whiteboards. Don't get me wrong – I have seen some wonderful uses of them in the classrooms that I have visited around the world, but in the majority of cases by far, the practice has been very poor. I think that this is partly because interactive boards are a classic example of 'enslaving technology' to a past methodology. In short, for many people they have just been a way of digitising a chalkboard, or providing a very expensive projector screen.

So are they really worth the money? Is it really a good idea to spend most of your precious ICT budget on equipping every classroom in your school with an expensive board and associated projector system? Schools often purchase the hardware, only to discover other small enabling works need to be considered and many companies will only provide warranty where the approved (and trained to their specification) engineer has set up and installed the hardware. Any engineer's time will not be cheap and so this is a potential hidden cost that should be considered. Think about the future too. Software that drives smart boards must be compliant with operating systems on the devices. Will it be compatible with future operating system upgrades or other devices? If not, the boards may not be able to be used for their interactive capability and will have little use beyond becoming expensive display boards. One simple solution is just to use a projector and forget about the interactivity that is provided by an interactive board. But projectors can bring other disadvantages to the classroom dynamic, which can create barriers for learning. These include the fact that projectors can be noisy and rooms often have to be in near darkness to see what is on the screen. They can also be expensive to maintain (depending on the type of bulb) and can increase the overall temperature of a room.

An alternative suggestion would be to use a large LCD screen, possibly with a mobile stand. If you are not fussed about the interactivity provided by a board and projector then this can be a pretty good solution. LCD screens are designed to be seen in most types of light, they run quietly, are highly energy efficient and they have integrated sound systems. You can also combine them with other technology such as Apple TV or software such as Ranger to add a different type of interactivity to your classroom display system.



DECISION TWO:



It seems that everyone wants a tablet computer these days and they have become the latest classroom 'must have' gadget. Unfortunately, lots of people who are keen on the idea don't really understand what tablet computers are. It's not just about a whizzy touch screen; a good tablet should also have a long battery life and a fast boot up time, be highly portable, and run a variety of apps that are suitable for classroom use.

It worries me that some schools in the UK that I know of have replaced almost all of their computer capital with tablet devices and then realised to the detriment of the learning experience that in many cases these are less powerful than a traditional laptop or desktop computer and therefore can no longer deliver aspects of the curriculum.

The problem (like so many times before) is that people invest in the technology without really thinking about what it is going to be used for. In many cases the main reason why schools need computers is for young people to access resources on the internet. But there will always be specialist situations within schools (eg a technical drawing lab) where high-specification machines will be required to cope with industry standard software.

Another issue with tablets is that people often buy them because of a specific app. Apps, like any piece of software, have a shelf life and they also normally have an associated cost. Schools need to think seriously about if it is really worth the investment to purchase an expensive piece of hardware that in practice will only be used to do one or two things.

In reality, neither tablets or laptops hold the answer in themselves – but both might be part of the solution. The best technology integration in schools is often a blended approach. There may be a third type of technology in the mix, too – for example, if you're just looking for students to be able to access the internet, you could consider a Chromebook (they are pretty cheap and it is quite remarkable what you can do with them, from web browsing to word processing).

+ ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

OLLIE BRAY:
OLLIEBRAY.COM
 MICROSOFT SHAPE THE FUTURE:
MICROSOFT.COM/SHAPETHEFUTURE
 GOOGLE CHROMEBOOKS:
GOOGLE.COM/INTL/EN/CHROME/DEVICES

DECISION THREE:

BYOT VS SCHOOL SUPPLIED TECHNOLOGY

Whether it's Bring Your Own Technology (BYOT), Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) or Bring Your Own Browser (BYOB), the idea of getting students (and staff) to come into school with their own laptops, tablets or is one that is gaining traction in some areas of the world and definitely starting to take off in parts of the UK.

The biggest mistake that some schools are making here is that they see it as a cost saving measure rather than one that will have an impact on learning.

Indeed, a BYOD model makes several potentially flawed assumptions: first, that students have a device to bring in the first place (and that they will be able to do so); secondly, that your teaching staff are prepared to facilitate learning in a 1:1 environment (where each child has an internet enabled device); and finally, that the facilitation of learning is an easy task where each child has a different type of device (albeit it each with a web browser).

The truth of the matter is that good teaching within the world of 1:1 is a tricky business and even some of our best teachers are still trying to develop pedagogy where the technology both enhances and helps stretch students in all aspects of the curriculum.

I believe that most schools will move to BYOD sooner rather than later, but that doesn't mean we should be dismissing school supplied technology all together. Quite the opposite, in fact. Schools who wish to move towards models of 1:1 both quickly and effectively should really consider models of leasing. My preference would be those where the responsibility of the leasing of the devices falls to the individual families. The beauty of creative leasing models is that you can still give families a choice of what they lease (the device) and make sure you have a unified operating system (don't forget that an operating system these days might be the browser itself, e.g. Google Chrome).

Finally, it's worth reminding ourselves that the most impact in terms of ICT in education doesn't come from large purchases of devices and hardware. It comes from thinking creatively about how existing technology can be used to enhance learning and by improving teacher confidence by exposing them and making them aware of good and interesting practice around the world. Think before you buy!