

A QUESTION OF SUPPORT

Ensuring schools' funds are invested wisely is always a challenge, but when it comes to ICT – that sometimes murky world of servers, switches and networks – how can managers ensure that they are making the right decisions? TS investigates...

Business experts, educators, cheerleaders, financiers and fire fighters. At times, school leaders and teachers will undertake many of these roles, but some of the more taxing financial decisions will often relate to ICT. The role of school leaders has undoubtedly shifted as schools in many areas move away from local authority support. Kevin Wilson, headteacher of All Saints Catholic School in Dagenham believes this has changed responsibilities radically. "Increasingly, school leaders have been forced to adopt a 'business like' approach when running their schools, to ensure they operate like well-oiled machines, and best-value procurement has certainly become an important phrase for us, especially when implementing a new technology," he observes. "We have to make sure that it not only makes financial sense, but that it is also successful in supporting and enhancing the educational experience for students."

So what do schools need to look for? "Before considering any investment schools should carry out a pre-purchasing review to scope the need, specification and evaluation process," says the education sector's trade association, the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA). "In terms of the need, ensure you are not being sold add on features that are nice to have but really not necessary for your specific requirement," elaborates the association's director, Caroline Wright. "Be sure to compare like for like; are the terms of the warranty exactly the same? Once this has been done quotations can be collected, but it is school leadership teams that need to take the lead on this."

Tony Ryan, headteacher of Chiswick School, agrees. "Budgetary decisions related to IT should be subject to the same rules as elsewhere across the school. These often quite large financial decisions cannot be delegated to technicians or subject leaders; they have to be taken by senior leaders who are paid to make decisions at this level."

Freedom and responsibility – the snags

It is certainly true that there are stories that can make your eyes water; schools entering into leasing agreements that cost hundreds of thousands, and even heads losing their jobs over bad decisions. So does this mean that purchasing external help is not quite the inappropriate use of a school's funds that we may have once thought it was? Yes, but tread carefully, is the advice from BESA's Caroline Wright. "Advice can come from a local authority, a




35%

NUMBER OF ICT TEACHERS WHO ARE SPECIALISTS, ACCORDING TO GOVERNMENT STATISTICS

managed service or from independent consultancies and, although this comes at a cost, it is now something that schools need to do in today's environment where they have been given the freedom to spend their budgets as they wish."

Tony supports the view that schools should consider external support if in doubt, but sees the potential complications that can occur. "Schools either need very strong in-house teams, or will have to buy in this level of expertise. The problem is you do not know what you don't know until you start to develop an area. It is very hard for in-house teams to be experts in all fields; by nature they will often have very limited experience, often only within their school; this does not help. I believe purchasing access to expertise is a better way forward. This does not have to cost




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the earth but again you need to create a clear brief stating what your expectations are of the company involved, what services are included within the agreed contract and which will fall outside thus enlisting additional charges."

What, then, are the main areas that schools need to look at when deciding on external support? European Electronic is a leading technology company that has operated in the education sector for a number of years, witnessing the move from local authority control to more autonomy.

Co-founder and director, Yolanta Gill, believes that defining the approach and requirements of ICT is key before any decisions are made. "ICT should underpin the school's strategy for education. Once you have this, an understanding of what you need to achieve can be laid out with a technical view – schools may need help with this if they don't have the correct people in house. Understanding if money was well spent will be based on outcomes related back to the vision. These may be results, engagement, teaching or economic factors, but they must be defined at the start of the process."

Mark Orchison, managing director of independent consultants 9ine, currently working with Chiswick School, also believes that knowing what is needed from any ICT investment is crucial. "A quick one off IT review will always provide value so long as the starting point is asking 'why?'

Why are you currently using technology that way? Why do you want to change? The review needs to understand the school strategy; talk to students, talk to teaching staff and importantly talk to IT staff. The review must also look at the financial spend of the school on IT and reprographics, benchmarking this against 'best value' costs. This will provide a baseline from which assumptions can be made on affordability and also on opportunity."

Pitfalls and ruts in the road

If understanding why an investment is being made – whether to improve educational outcomes, streamline costs or engage students – is the first and most important step, being aware of the potential pitfalls is perhaps the next vital point. Mark Orchison believes that lack of clarity, jargon and gaps in understanding are the serious issues that can really cost schools money. "Making the right decisions regarding IT in schools is often hampered by people over complicating technology, or the consequences of technology," he points out. "We often find suppliers or hardware vendors exacerbate this with overly complex terminology and the array of functionality their systems provide. In fact, we find schools use only a limited amount of functionality of the technology that they are sold."

Tony Ryan agrees. "IT has its own language and with the greatest of respect, technicians that can communicate often complex concepts in layman's terms are rare. We have separated the subject ICT from the strategic development and management of the subject. I don't want my curriculum team leader making purchasing decisions for the network... his job is to ensure that we are offering challenging, relevant courses and that students are taking these and achieving their very best."

In-house, consultancy or managed service?

Every school's needs are different and what works for a small parish school in a rural area will undoubtedly be very different from what works for an inner city school, so whom should schools approach first? Like other sectors, advice from peers and word of mouth tends to play a large role.

"We went through recommendation," says Tony Ryan. "I was fortunate enough to know where to ask, reputation and experience is everything – but you are building a relationship and as such need to be able to work with the lead contact for the school. I believe an ideal situation is that you work with an outside provider to build up expertise in house; but then keep a base level of service so that you always have access to high level expertise when needed."

9ine's Mark Orchison sees knowledge and approach as vital. "In terms of expertise schools need to look for independent consultants who have the experience and capability to talk about different learning approaches and who also have practical experience and understanding of the technology in schools. A good consultancy should remove the ambiguity from these decisions, speak to schools about their teaching and learning requirements, and then work back through the systems architecture to understand what they actually need."

Yolanta Gill agrees. "A good ICT provider will be happy to discuss with you what you want to achieve and how it can be managed. Understanding what you're looking to achieve with ICT is the first crucial step to getting the most out of your investment. The easiest way to do this is to engage with other schools and ask them what they are doing – a forward thinking member of teaching staff can leverage the ICT they have, to capture the imagination of students and harness children's boundless enthusiasm for new experiences. ICT is never a substitute for a committed and passionate member of staff, but it can multiply the opportunities that staff can bring to students a thousand-fold – like a library that is continually changing and updating."