



Making Decisions about Technical Support in Primary Schools

The provision of technical backup for a primary school can be a very difficult one. In a typical two form entry scenario, it is not unusual for the school to be running a network of sixty or more computers. At Crumpsall Lane, where I teach, we run a ninety-five screen network.

Such a situation transposed to business would mean the provision of a dedicated IT manager to run the services for the organisation. In secondary schools this is now the model that the majority have adopted. Why not fit it to primaries as well?

Defining the Role

The main problem when saying “I want technical support” is one of definition. What do we really mean when we say we want a dedicated IT support technician? Becta have provide a useful four tier structure in order for schools to better define their needs, ranging from an enthusiastic teaching assistant who has specialised in ICT and can support the teaching and learning of ICT as well as helping to support the network infrastructure by maintaining the backup system, user database etc, to the full blown systems manager who can install software, undertake major system upgrades and solve difficult technical issues.

To employ the latter, the school will be looking at an annual salary starting around £25k. A TA specialising in ICT would normally be at least TA3 level, i.e. around £15k.

Keeping it in house

A further problem is one of recruitment and retention. How many primary schools have the necessary knowledge to recruit an ICT systems manager with the right qualifications? Would you even know what qualifications you need to ask for? The local secondary school or CLC may be able to offer some advice, however, be extremely wary about accepting occasional support from your local secondary or CLC. Who is going to pick up the bill if they make a mistake on your network? Some areas have tried a model with an engineer based at a local secondary or CLC, but this model relies heavily on the quality of the person employed. Are they dedicated to supporting their cluster? Or, is there time shared with the CLC or secondary? Where do their priorities lie? What is the nature of the relationship between supplier and customer?

A possible solution is to share a systems manager with a cluster of primary schools, and this can work well providing you budget carefully to include on costs such as mileage allowance. It also helps enormously to pick schools with similar network systems, so that the person doing the job can rationalise the networks and schools can gain discounts through bulk purchasing. Ultimately, one school will have to act as the line manager for the person recruited, but pick the right engineer, and you will soon be getting other schools to ask to join your group.

Some schools consider taking on a college leaver or similar as a technician. However, I would advise extreme caution when considering this line. Such people rarely have any knowledge of the requirements of an educational system, as opposed to the business model that they have been trained upon. They will also need a high level of supervision and direction, not to mention monitoring – who is going to take on this role? There is also the need to consider your relationship with your IT provider – if your technician makes a botch of a job on the fileserver, and you have to get the company who sold that server in to rectify the mess, there is no doubt that they will charge you top dollar. If you want a person on-site offering low level technical support (e.g. sorting out printers, managing user records, data backups etc), I would strongly recommend identifying an enthusiastic individual already on the team and provide them with the necessary time and training.

Another solution is to use your LEA. Many, if not most offer some form of contracted IT service, ranging from full network installation to technical support. Typically, you will be provided with a service level agreement defining what level of support you can expect. I would tend to view such documents as a purely commercial agreement and would compare what services you will get with a commercial enterprise. Work on recommendation, talk to schools who have their technical support provided by the LEA, are they happy. The picture across the region is very mixed, with some LEAs having a reputation for excellent technical support services, and others somewhat lacking.

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Private Industry

If this doesn't work, consider buying in extra technical support from a reputable organisation or individual, often the company that installed your server originally. There are a myriad of companies out there who can offer technical support contracts for networks, and this is perhaps the easiest solution for most schools. There is a clearly defined supplier/customer relationship and usually a Service Level Agreement between the two parties. Read this document carefully and make sure you understand it. If you want it changing, tell the supplier exactly what you want. If you are not offered a Service Level Agreement, either ask for one, or check references very carefully.

The main issue is one of quality and immediacy - do you know what level of qualification the person assigned to your school is? Will it always be the same person? (I always insist on the same engineer to work on our network), how long will I have to wait for a site visit? All these questions should be answered by your Service Level Agreement, and reputable companies often offer several different levels of SLA.

What happens if something serious goes wrong with the network? - answer: it depends upon your SLA; most SLAs do not run to a full disaster recovery service and you usually end up paying for the amount of time the engineer spends on site. A server rebuild could easily take ten days, and the bill at £500 per day + for a fully qualified network engineer would send most headteachers over the edge! Think very carefully about this issue, and make sure that any SLA you enter into is right for your school.

Some schools use an independent ICT consultant to provide technical support. These people are usually self-employed and rely very heavily on recommendation to get new business. They often operate on a much more flexible basis than the large companies and will usually arrange a contract for a fixed number of days per year in your school, with a clearly defined rate for extra days (usually much less per day than the major providers such as RM and Viglen). There is an increased risk to the school in that you are relying on an individual, rather than an organisation, however, in many cases, because of their flexibility and customer focus, the independent consultant can offer the school the best possible value for money. If you have found someone like this, check references very carefully before entering into a contract.

Crumpsall Lane's Model

At Crumpsall Lane we have a TA3 who supports the teaching and learning of ICT, maintains the network backup and user data base, and manages the school website (the school paid for her to go on an OU course). Technical network support is provided by a fully qualified network engineer employed by our IT provider who comes in once every half-term. As ICT co-ordinator, I do some of the basic trouble-shooting and communication with technical support hotlines (always by email). If I didn't do this, our network engineer would need to be in school for about twelve days a year.

To a lot of people, six days on-site network support sounds very little, however we have spent a great deal of time and money investing in a reliable network infrastructure, and this last factor is one that should never be overlooked. Because our network is essentially very stable, maintenance and upgrades happen in a planned way and most issues are resolved either by email, or by our IT provider remotely dialling in to the network and sorting it out there and then.

From the outset, Crumpsall Lane made a major investment into the network infrastructure. The result of this is lower annual support costs, very little network down time and the right software in the right place. Teachers are confident in their ability to deliver their planned curriculum, and to innovate.

Network Reliability

Just how reliable is your network? Do teachers have faith that they will be able to teach their lessons using ICT? The final major consideration when thinking about technical support for your school is to be honest with yourself about your network. If your network is made up of a range of pcs of varying spec and antiquity running on a server that has been added to and upgraded here and there, the answer probably is that no matter how much network support you buy, your ICT systems will still be unreliable, and the quality of teaching and learning will inevitably suffer as a result.

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Sources of advice:

The government-funded IPAS scheme (Independent Procurement Advice Service) has been wound up, unfortunately. But there are some sources of independent advice on the net (see the links below). Creative ICT does not offer technical support to schools, however, we are very happy to provide independent advice on your proposed course of action - just drop us an email.

Weblinks:

<http://www.becta.org.uk/ntss/index.cfm> - lots of useful information on job descriptions, recruitment etc.

<http://www.ictchoice.org.uk/> - search for Becta approved suppliers

<http://www.creativeict.co.uk/consultancy.html> - a provider of independent advice on procurement and technical support

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