CAMPUS TECHNOLOGY

Cloud Computing | Feature

3 Ways to Improve Collaboration via the Cloud--for Less

Moving to the cloud can help schools boost collaboration among students, faculty, and staff--while still cutting costs. CT looks at 3 cloud-based tools that can make a difference.

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Collaboration is one of the hottest terms in education these days, which is ironic when you consider how compartmentalized universities tend to be. Large schools are notorious for inefficient communications and duplicative systems, and even small universities bear the burdens of bureaucracy and siloed information. Fortunately, cloud-based collaborative tools offer a way out of the morass--and can save schools a lot of money in the long run. And, with so many students now working from home, such tools may be the best bet for efficient distance learning, too. Here are three ways cloud-based collaboration can provide cheaper, faster, and more effective communications at your school.

1) Real-Time Conferencing

In-person meetings can be a real hassle for students and busy professors. The problem was particularly acute at Coppin State University (MD), where 85 percent of students are commuters, mostly working adults who can't attend office hours or study sessions during the day. To address the issue, the school implemented Lync, Microsoft's cloud-based conferencing system.

"Before Lync, we did not have a collaborative environment," said Ahmed Al-Haggan, Coppin's CIO. "Just to come to campus to talk to faculty was quite a headache." The Lync cloud allows students to hold real-time, webcam meetings with professors and fellow students at their convenience. The same is true for faculty and administrators, who can now hold quick discussions and polls without physically gathering.

Collaboration has also become easier for Coppin's IT department. Lync features a desktop-takeover program that allows for near-instantaneous tech support across campus. Instead of waiting for tech help to arrive, professors can simply grant temporary access to Al-Haggan and his staff. Since the whole service is in the cloud, even off-campus students and workers can get support on their laptops. According to Al-Haggan, this collaborative environment has saved hours of time each week. In fact, the frequency of his physical meetings has sharply declined.

As for costs, Lync has freed up more resources than it requires. Webcams are the only hardware requirement, so Coppin simply purchased webcam-equipped desktops during its most recent upgrade. By being cloud-based, moreover, Lync allows the school to bypass myriad licensing fees for local machines. Everyone at the school can access Lync from their desktops, laptops, tablets, and phones with a single sign-on. And, of course, the switch to a third-party cloud means fewer on-site servers and less time spent on maintenance.

2) Streamlined Productivity Suites
E-mails, file-sharing, and learning management systems: They're all supposed to make education more efficient and productive, yet they remain a source of untold frustration to students and teachers alike. In a bid to cut down on lost data and redundant messages, Fresno State University (CA) moved its mail, document sharing, and calendar programs to the Google Apps cloud.

"The first thing Google Apps allowed me to do is cut down on e-mail," said Dave Childers, an adjunct professor at Fresno's Kremen School of Education and Human Development. Instead of e-mailing hundreds of rough drafts and final copies per assignment, Childers' students just upload and edit their files in one shared Google Docs folder. Google's software accepts a wide range of file types, so users rarely have to worry about compatibility or formatting. The switch has made grading far easier, but that's not why Childers likes it so much. "More important to me than the letter grade is that Google Docs has really made me more feedback-driven," he noted. By spending less time on repetitive clerical tasks, he can devote more energy to personal collaboration with his students.

While schools might achieve similar results with on-site systems, the cloud is also a clear cost-cutter. In fact, Childers said that he's "never heard any institution say they've done anything *but* save money" by collaborating in the cloud. On-premise improvements require additional hardware, software, and tech support, and system crashes can take hours or days to fix. On the other hand, Google Apps and similar suites offer dedicated support and single sign-on, and problems are usually resolved within minutes. Unless your school is large enough to support a private cloud, a third-party solution like this is probably your best bet.

3) Reliable Telepresence
Even if your current system can handle campus communications, what do you do when you need to collaborate across branches, universities, or even countries? For Hendrix College (AR), Blue Jeans' cloud-based videoconferencing software was a clear choice. "We needed a way to add together room-based systems and desktop systems all in one conference call," explained CIO David Hinson. The interoperable Blue Jeans platform allows disparate students and faculty to participate in conference calls and synchronous online classes from almost any device. It also bridges Skype, Polycom, and a host of other presence programs, so users rarely have to worry about their own software. They just log in or call in from anywhere in the world.

As a member of the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS), Hendrix has found Blue Jeans particularly useful in pushing the New Paradigm Initiative, a program for offering specialized courses across the consortium's 16 schools. Rather than hire new faculty for courses that typically see low demand, Hendrix can patch students into live lectures at other ACS universities. Some participants attend lectures in person at camera-equipped lecture halls, while remote viewers sign in with laptops or mobile phones. Blue Jeans has also proved valuable for long-distance interviews, allowing graduating seniors to communicate "face-to-face" with potential employers.

The cost savings are a big bonus, too. "First and foremost, Blue Jeans has been a huge money-saver on infrastructure," said Hinson. "It saved us $60,000 to $70,000 compared to purchasing a dedicated multipoint control unit." Since the system is in the cloud, the school doesn't have to worry about contracts with hardware vendors, either. Hendrix is free to upgrade its room-based conferencing systems as its needs expand, and students and faculty can keep using their own mobile devices in the meantime. "Given the current economic environment," concluded Hinson, "we always want to make sure we're making good technology buys."

About the Author

David LaMartina is a Kansas City-based writer specializing in health and education.