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Plan for the future by optimising your IT infrastructure

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Microsoft recently put its Infrastructure Optimisation tool online. IT directors and managers have been emailed details of how to access and complete it. But is it worth doing? Graham Jarvis looks at one trust's experience.

In 2007, like many other NHS organisations, Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre Hospitals Foundation trust found itself needing to modernise its IT infrastructure.

The trust runs a complex and distributed Microsoft-centric IT environment, which is also expanding rapidly. "The infrastructure is evolving constantly," says Philip Graham, its head of information management and technology. "Technical and administrative staff are becoming more dependent on IT for communication and access to key systems."

These changes were impacting on the IT department. Technical staff had to keep dealing with routine issues, such as password requests, but development teams were increasingly being asked for more systems. There was no parallel increase in technical staffing resources, and budgets had to be justified.

More focused investment decisions were required to enable the trust to become more efficient, agile and responsive to operational demands.

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A partner's perception

An ongoing review process began, using Microsoft's Infrastructure Optimisation (IO) tool. This allowed the trust to review and assess the maturity of the existing infrastructure and then form a realistic assessment of what could be achieved in future.

The process was managed by the trust's IT partner, Microsoft-certified BDS Solutions, and began with a simple meeting in November 2007. Although the IO tool makes strategic recommendations, a partner's perception can be invaluable in clearly defining what the trust's objectives and key issues are.

"The development of a long term strategy to improve IT infrastructure services starts by gaining an understanding of the current situation and identifying strengths and areas for improvement," says Lee Ballinger, technical director at BDS Solutions.

"In the case of this trust, quality and availability were recognised as key factors. Pressure also came from demands for new services against shorter delivery timeframes."

Taking steps to develop maturity

BDS Solutions took Mr Graham and his team through the IO assessment process, using the first iteration of the IO tool. At the time, this took the form of a spreadsheet with a series of questions for benchmarking the maturity of the trust's existing IT infrastructure.

"BDS conducted an interview with the key representatives of the trust's IT management, and completed the spreadsheet during a simple meeting session," says Mr Ballinger.

The tool has since been updated and put online too. However, both formats ask many of the same questions. The result is "a simple and repeatable approach for benchmarking an organisation's technical maturity, and helping to determine the new capabilities a trust needs," Mr Ballinger says.

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The tool is fairly all-embracing. Over the course of a few hours, the trust and its partner examined every aspect of its IT management - servers, networks, security, data warehousing and transfer. Using the IO tool, any NHS organisation can similarly assess their progress towards a dynamic and progressive infrastructure across all these different disciplines.

Discovering the baseline

The first benefit of using the IO tool is the establishment of a baseline - a statement of "where we are now." In the field of data protection and recovery, for example, Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre Hospitals Foundation trust was between the "rationalised" and "standardised" levels.

"This means that we are maturing as an IT organisation to support our core business of patient care," says Mr Graham. "The systems we run are not just counting widgets; we have the confidence that we are also providing excellent support."

On the other hand, the trust's security processes are currently at the "basic" level. "This means we have a baseline for improvement and can justify focusing resources in this area", he explains. "We need to get our security processes up to at least the 'standardised' level so that we have no issue."

Crucially, the IO tool also allows Mr Graham to see how things have improved over time. "Twelve months ago, we were bidding to get the infrastructure review, but now I am bidding to get money to implement it," he says.

By having an idea of current status, and regular review points, the road to effective – and financially justifiable – IT investment is much clearer. "The buck stops with me," says Mr Graham. "I won't just dish out my budget; I can now look at going from 'basic' to 'dynamic' IT by investing wisely."

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Next steps

BDS Solutions submitted its full report in early 2008, outlining a series of recommendations which the trust is now considering. It is early days, but the IO tool has allowed IT staff to think holistically about each aspect of their operations.

"The information generated is currently being used to support the selection, prioritisation and sequencing of several infrastructure projects," says Mr Ballinger. "The assessment may then be repeated in the future once the trust has implemented the recommendations made during this ongoing project."

There are other benefits as well. "By increasing our level of infrastructure maturity, we can be visibly perceived as being much more professional," says Mr Graham. "Staff at all levels can understand that IT is a key part of the healthcare business and that the cultural change towards a more tech-savvy workforce is happening."

Managers are now thinking more positively than they might have felt capable of doing previously. Mr Graham no doubt speaks for many IT staff in the NHS when he says: "It's a lot better when you are managing forward and not backwards. When you have users complaining about your service all of the time...it's not much of a job."

He is now working on a plan for the next financial year, starting in April. "I am looking to feed in the budget planning for the next year with an understanding of where I am now. I'd like to improve some of the areas in which we have scored only a 'basic' competence. It is a continuous improvement; that's what we are looking for."

Related Articles

- [More information about the tool is also available here](#)
- [Review the **webcast: Reduce your IT costs through Infrastructure Optimisation**](#)

Next steps:

The Microsoft UK healthcare team has emailed IT directors and managers with details of how to access and complete the three Infrastructure Optimisation assessments online.

If you are an IT director/manager and you have not received this email, please contact the NHS Resource Centre online team at nhsweb@microsoft.com with your trust name and email address and we will send you the information within five working days.

About BDS Solutions: BDS Solutions is a leading technology partner for public and private sector organisations, with a strong focus on the NHS. More information about the company, the importance of infrastructure optimisation, and how it can help with this and other technology needs is available at: www.bds-solutions.co.uk

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