



School District Scraps Open-Source Solution, Boosts Productivity by 50 Percent

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Education

Customer Profile

Forsyth County Schools has 4,500 employees and serves more than 35,000 students at 35 elementary, middle, and high schools; at additional alternative and charter schools; and in special programs.

Business Situation

After replacing a longtime Microsoft Office installation with OpenOffice, the district struggled with compatibility problems that hindered productivity.

Solution

Forsyth County Schools decided to return to a Microsoft Office roadmap, with an immediate deployment of Microsoft Office 2007 and plans for a subsequent deployment of Microsoft Office 2010.

Benefits

- Personal productivity up by 50 percent
- Optimal use of applications and databases
- Efficient working environment
- Powerful positioning for the future

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Bailey Mitchell, Chief Information Officer, Forsyth County Schools

Forsyth County Schools serves a rapidly growing student population near Atlanta, Georgia, with a longtime commitment to academic and technology innovation. Facing tightened budgets in late 2008, the district decided to move away from its longtime use of Microsoft Office and deploy OpenOffice to some 20,000 computers, but with this deployment a number of compatibility problems stymied productivity. After just over a year, the district returned to Microsoft Office, with an initial deployment of Microsoft Office 2007 as a transition step in a larger move to Microsoft Office 2010. Now, tasks that took hours in OpenOffice are completed in just minutes, teachers are making optimal use of a powerful learning management system, administrators are doing the same with line-of-business applications and databases, and students are working more efficiently in and out of the classroom.



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Situation

Forsyth County Schools educates more than 35,000 students in a 413-square-mile area roughly 30 miles north of Atlanta, Georgia. While serving a rapidly expanding student population in one of the fastest-growing counties in the United States, the district has earned accolades as a state and national leader in academics. For example, numerous schools in the district have been named among the “Georgia Schools of Excellence” by the state’s Department of Education, and in 2010 one of the district’s high schools was included in Newsweek magazine’s “Top of the Class” list of some 1,600 high schools throughout the United States.

Forsyth County Schools also has earned multiple state and national awards for its leadership in technology innovation, including a 2010 “Investing in Innovation” grant from the U.S. Department of Education, recognizing the district’s pioneering use of information technology to support collaboration in the classroom and beyond. Since 2005, all Forsyth County Schools classrooms have used interactive whiteboards and web-based streaming audio and video applications to enhance the teaching of math, language arts, and other core subjects. Teachers rely on electronic portfolios to support group projects and track student progress, and share activities and assessments through an online repository of tools. Teachers also have access to a powerful learning management system implemented districtwide to further enhance creativity and collaboration.

Another component of the IT toolset at Forsyth County Schools is the Microsoft Office suite, which the district first used widely starting in the mid-1990s and continuing into late 2008. At that time, when the economic downturn increased

pressure to reduce licensing costs, the district took a different approach, with an initiative to implement an open-source solution. Through that initiative, the district replaced Office 2003 with OpenOffice software on some 20,000 computers at schools, district offices, and students’ and teachers’ homes.

Over time, however, that initiative failed to yield the desired results, according to Bailey Mitchell, Chief Information Officer, Forsyth County Schools. “Problems with compatibility, which barely registered during our pilot deployment, grew to enormous proportions once we deployed into production,” he says. “Our power users could no longer easily open documents containing macros or specialized formatting, import forms with drop-down menus, or produce content for our learning management system. They were delayed or prevented from performing business-intelligence analyses using data from our student information system, opening data files from the state’s department of education and external agencies, or doing almost anything that involved HTML or XLS files. The problems just went on and on.”

As a result, productivity plummeted, and not just among power users. “Students, teachers, administrators, and support staff across the board, from financial analysts to bus-route schedulers, wasted time and effort trying to use OpenOffice in our environment,” Mitchell says. “People were spending 30 to 50 percent more time than they had in the past to create and modify documents—activities that constitute the staple of the work or school day.”

These productivity problems were especially troublesome because around the same time that Forsyth County Schools moved to OpenOffice, the district also was ramping up use of its learning

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management system to better engage students with a blend of traditional classroom content and online instructional materials. "Teachers were eager to convert some key content and learning activities for use in the online system, but performance and compatibility issues frustrated their efforts," Mitchell says. "With OpenOffice, we had thrown a monkey wrench into the process."

Yet another problem affected students who were trying to complete assignments on their home computers—a problem that troubled their parents as well. "After watching their child struggle in OpenOffice to access otherwise familiar documents, parents would express their frustration to the teachers, who relayed these grievances to the principals," according to Jeff Hunt, Principal, North Middle School. "Dissatisfaction with OpenOffice was everywhere."

Solution

After meeting with Hunt and more than 30 other principals over the course of a year, Mitchell and his team decided it was time to move Forsyth County Schools back to the Microsoft Office suite. In addition to their desire to eliminate the compatibility problems surrounding OpenOffice, Mitchell and his colleagues were motivated by what they were learning about the newest release of Microsoft Office, Microsoft Office 2010. "We especially liked the Web Apps capability of Office 2010, because we were moving rapidly in the direction of making everything we do web-facing," Mitchell says. "We also were intrigued by the rich-content authoring tools, particularly the in-presentation video-editing capabilities of PowerPoint 2010, because video plays an important role in our interactive whiteboard solution."

In early 2010, Mitchell and his team presented their case to the district board. "Because board members had heard the same arguments already from teachers, principals, administrators, parents, just about everyone, their response was overwhelmingly positive," Mitchell says. "And for their part, the principals were so excited to be moving back to Microsoft Office that they reached into their own activity accounts to purchase licenses for their teachers, while the district set out to cover the costs for students and staff."

That left only the question of which Microsoft Office release to deploy. Mitchell explains that as much as he and others were eager to put new Office 2010 capabilities to use, matters of timing and urgency required a slightly different approach. "At the time, the release of Office 2010 was some months in the future," he explains. "Considering our funding and hardware-refresh cycles, and the growing excitement surrounding the move, we decided to go ahead with a deployment of Microsoft Office 2007 and plan for an upgrade to Office 2010."

In a four-month period preceding the opening of the 2010 school year, a three-person team from the district's office of technology services, assisted by site-based technology specialists, replaced OpenOffice with Microsoft Office Professional Plus 2007 on every one of the more than 20,000 computers installed at 35 schools and four administrative sites. Team members used the Altiris Deployment Solution from Symantec to expedite the project, and through the learning management system they provided links to free* online training tools from Microsoft for users who wanted help with the Ribbon, part of the Microsoft Office Fluent interface.

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Sue Derison, Director of Information Systems, Forsyth County Schools

As it turns out, very little training was necessary for Forsyth County Schools users. “It was such a pleasure to have Microsoft Office back on my desk that I was happy to use the resources embedded in the toolset and among my peer network to learn the Ribbon,” says Hunt, whose experience appears to be common. “With OpenOffice, we provided every user 10 to 12 hours of formal training, and still had problems,” Mitchell says. “But with our return to Microsoft Office, no one has expressed a need for any formal training.”

As for the next step in the process, the district will work toward its deployment of Microsoft Office 2010, a project that will include deployment of Microsoft Exchange Server 2010 and adoption of the Microsoft Live@edu hosted communication and collaboration services. Mitchell says that he and his colleagues are excited about what all this will mean for Forsyth County Schools. “We’ll be using the rich-content authoring capabilities of Office 2010 to streamline our ongoing migration from textbooks to a predominantly online environment, as well as the enhanced data-visualization features of Excel 2010 to optimize the output of our performance and accounting systems,” Mitchell says. “We’ll also use the Live@edu offerings to further our goal of using the software-as-a-service hosting model to enhance the classroom experience.”

Benefits

“When we returned to Microsoft Office after our experience with OpenOffice, you could practically hear a collective sigh of relief, across the entire district,” Mitchell says. And with good reason, because Forsyth County Schools teachers, administrators, principals, and students are reporting significant gains in productivity and are making better use of IT resources in general. In addition, teachers and

students are working more efficiently in the classroom and on their home computers, graduating seniors are better prepared for the world of work or college, and the district itself is better able to continue its tradition of technology innovation.

Boosting Productivity by 50 Percent

With Microsoft Office back on their desktop and laptop computers, students, teachers, and staff throughout Forsyth County Schools are once again devoting their time and talents to getting work done—instead of struggling with files that won’t open, forms that won’t work, and figures that won’t compute. “Even while learning the new Ribbon user interface, I am accomplishing a wide range of tasks—from formatting a text document to disaggregating districtwide student test data—in just minutes, instead of the hours these tasks sometimes took in OpenOffice,” Hunt says. “Considering that I’m just one of thousands of users throughout the district, that’s a productivity gain that is hard to fathom.”

Perhaps nowhere is the productivity gain of Microsoft Office more apparent than among power users like Sue Derison, Director of Information Systems, Forsyth County Schools, and her counterparts in finance, accounting, and human resources who work extensively with Microsoft Excel spreadsheet software. “Office Excel 2007 is an awesome product,” Derison says. “Because we no longer struggle with the compatibility problems of OpenOffice, importing, exporting, and analyzing data is one-third faster than in that environment. Moreover, because sorting, formatting, and table and chart creation are more powerful and more intuitive in Office 2007 than in earlier versions of the software, my own overall productivity is up by 50 percent.”

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Optimizing Technology Resources

With the move to Microsoft Office, Forsyth County Schools administrators and other staff are also making the most of the comprehensive data and IT resources available to them. "We have a treasure trove of data in our systems for accounting, human resources, student information, transportation, warehousing inventory, food planning, services, and more, but with OpenOffice we couldn't take full advantage of the intelligence bound up in that data," Derison says. "In contrast, with Microsoft Office we can import and export the data seamlessly, and with Office Excel we can easily perform the kind of analyses we need for implementing initiatives that will help the district to keep student achievement at high levels."

For teachers, the deployment of Microsoft Office is helping to open up what Mitchell calls the "transformational" possibilities of the learning management system.

"Teachers are converting paper-based course content for use in the new system without the incompatibility delays of before," he explains. "They are back on track with our migration of the classroom from a largely paper-based environment to one that is mostly online."

Having Microsoft Office back on Forsyth County Schools computers also is making a difference outside the classroom, for students working on their home computers, as almost all of them do. "Parents who used to watch their child struggle for minutes just to open a document in OpenOffice are now seeing their child open the same document in just seconds," Mitchell says. "These parents are thanking us for making it so much easier for their son or daughter to complete assignments at home."

Positioning for the Future

Now that the Microsoft Office suite is once again an integral part of the Forsyth County Schools technology roadmap, Mitchell is optimistic about what lies ahead. "With Microsoft Office, students are using the desktop productivity toolset they are most likely to encounter in higher education and the workplace, so they are better prepared for their future," he says. "And once we have installed Office 2010, students, teachers, administrators, and other staff members will take advantage of the 'anytime, anywhere' access of Office 2010 that aligns so well with our learning environment."

*Access to and use of the Internet may require payment of a separate fee to an Internet service provider. Local and/or long-distance telephone charges may apply.

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