

With greater autonomy, changes to the curriculum and the blistering rate of technological advancement, schools need to ensure that their ICT procurement is as effective – and cost effective – as possible. But should they be focusing on the technology, the contract terms or the suppliers themselves? And can they really future proof their ICT provision anyway?

The ways in which schools purchase their ICT are evolving in the wake of funding changes. Long gone are the days of ring-fenced ICT budgets and, although advice from the Department for Education is available, it is with a nod to the increased freedoms given to schools as the role of local authorities continues to alter. This shift in approach can be challenging. One common thread that runs through all recommendations is the importance of a clear vision, both for the immediate and longer term future. But where do schools start with this?

Caroline Wright, director of the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA) believes it begins with a review of aims and an understanding of the fine print. “Before considering any investment schools should carry out a pre-purchasing review to scope the need, specification and evaluation process,” she advises. “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. 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.”

For many, a successful plan starts with intended outcomes. “ICT procurement needs to be linked to the school’s vision for teaching and learning using technology,” says Mark Orchison, managing director of independent consultants and education specialists, 9ine

“If there is not a clear vision for how technology will support teaching and learning then ICT procurement will not be focused, will lack impact and will leave staff unsure as to what technologies they should be looking to use in the classroom...”



What's the SCORE?

↓ EFFECTIVE ICT PROCUREMENT IS ALL ABOUT KEEPING AHEAD OF THE GAME – SO WE ASKED A SELECTION OF EXPERTS TO SHARE THEIR TIPS FOR THE TEAM...



Consulting. “If there is not a clear vision for how technology will support teaching and learning then ICT procurement will not be focused, will lack impact and will leave staff unsure as to what technologies they should be looking to use in the classroom.”

Using the expertise of all staff is an approach that works for Chiswick School. Tony Ryan, headteacher, explains, “The safety valves that we have are that any long term procurement decision doesn’t sit with a tech specialist, it doesn’t even sit just with the head. We have a strategy group which involves heads of department, heads of teaching and learning, the head of technology and an external consultant.

Any decision to buy a major piece of kit goes through that group so we’re looking at it from many angles in order to get a balanced decision. That gives me a degree of comfort that we’re not wasting money and that we’ll get good value out of it and it’ll be used.”

With this approach, Chiswick School’s tablet scheme was a considered process. “When we were looking at tablets we trialled several different ones,” confirms Tony. “We then had breakfast meetings where staff discussed their experience using the different tablets so we could come to a consensus decision. We did that for about six months before we made the decision.”



“ The main risk to a school is not so much with the technology but the supplier. Beware of attractive-looking deals from ‘new kids on the block’, or companies that have no track record in education. Are they likely to understand your needs?”



Support strategies

While there are often new technologies that look impressive, total cost of ownership is a catch all phrase which cautions against falling for the latest in educational ICT. A full understanding of the support available should underpin any decision. “The success of a product can often be based on the level of support provided,” counsels BESA’s Caroline Wright. “Some suppliers may define training as a ten-minute demonstration of how to turn it on and off while others will offer a full day of in depth tuition. High quality training can be vital for the effectiveness of the product in the learning environment. Before purchase, always ask the supplier to provide a detailed outline of the level of training and support provided.”

Tony agrees with this. “We opted for the iPad after we trialled different tablets so that we can invest training in one place and one place only,” he observes. “Unless you have accounted for the cost of things that are fairly invisible like staff training then any decision will cost more than you think.”

Terry Freedman, former ICT teacher, independent consultant and editor of the popular online forum, ictineducation.org, also sees the role of supplier as key in the process: “The main risk to a school is not so much with the technology but the supplier. Beware of attractive-looking deals from ‘new kids on the block’, or companies that have no track record in education. Are they likely to understand your needs? Are they likely to even exist in five years’ time? It is impossible to answer that last question with any real certitude, even regarding well-established companies, so it is a matter of trying to reduce risks rather than eradicate them altogether.”

Mark at 9ine advises that schools consider the ‘total cost of learning’ too. “An important step in a school’s vision is forecasting the total cost over a three to five year period,” he points out. “This is what we call the ‘total cost of

£65,570

= the amount each UK state secondary school is expected to invest in hardware replacement, peripherals, software and technical support during the school year 2014/15

learning’. The school’s vision must be clear enough to inform which technologies should be procured. The school also needs to understand the current systems architecture and how new technologies will impact those systems.”

“We are seeing many cases of schools purchasing tablets without thinking about the associated infrastructure improvements that are necessary to make those tablets usable,” he continues. “As such the point at which the procurement of the tablet is made has not considered the total cost of learning. This is backed up by recent research by Tablets for Schools (tabletsforschools.co.uk), which identifies many schools not considering the impact of new technology as they do not understand what they currently have.”

Ultimately, the savvy approach is for schools to understand that they are in a position of power when buying and can negotiate safeguards, says Caroline. “However good the relationship with your supplier we strongly recommend agreeing an annual review of their prices and service level agreements. Avoid signing unnecessary contracts that tie you into sticking with the same price agreement from the same supplier to give yourself the power to compare their service with other suppliers on an annual basis.”

Playing it safe

Future proofing any ICT strategy requires a keen eye to the future and full consideration of the accumulative cost of things like staff training. Mark at 9ine believes that this starts with the school’s ultimate learning aim. “Ensure all your decisions are based on teaching and learning outcomes rather than the newest technology. Where possible do not agree to long term leases or hosted / virtualised desk-top solutions as these are often expensive and very inflexible. Installed and configured correctly, tablets and wireless will offer accessibility and reliability to learners. One to one schemes are also a safe bet once all change management, technical and financial aspects have been considered – but this does require the school to create a mobile learning strategy.”

Tony’s school certainly kept the future in mind when it came to ICT procurement decision. “We’ve built up a certain level of expertise with our current technology so to move to a different operating system could come with a cost. Ultimately, though, the decision has to be made based on the right tool for the job. We bank on companies that will continue to invest in education and stay ahead of the game, as things are moving so quickly and technology is very market driven.”

“If possible, keep some of your budget allocation back for spending later in the year,” adds Terry Freedman. “Unfortunately, in my experience not spending it fairly promptly can lead to its ‘disappearance’, so make your intentions known to the Head, just in case s/he mistakenly concludes that you didn’t need so much money in the first place. The only sure predictions for the future are that sundries such as printer paper are going to be needed for some time yet (unless your school has really managed to become paperless), and that some new technology will come along that will knock you off your feet,” he concludes. “Try to plan for both of these if you can.”