Soft Touch

Caroline Wright has some advice for schools about getting the best possible return on software investment...
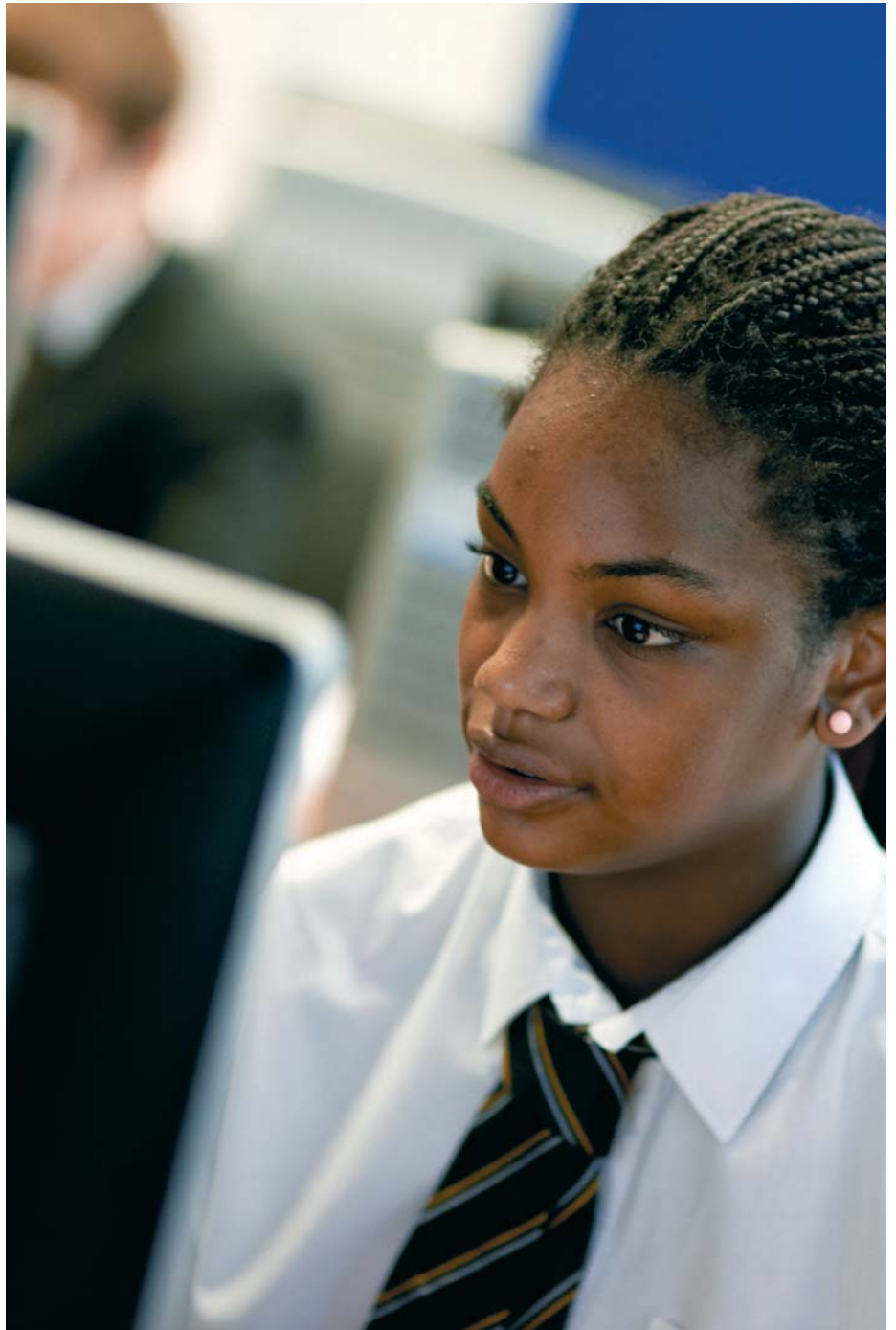
Investing in ICT (or anything else, for that matter) for the education market can seem rather like the croquet game in Alice in Wonderland. If you remember, the balls were live hedgehogs and the mallets were flamingos. The playing-card soldiers had to double themselves up and stand on their hands and feet to make the arches. Everybody played the game with enthusiasm, but there were no rules; the flamingos flew away and the hedgehogs hid. The role of the playing cards was literally to 'move the goalposts' at any opportunity. It is not surprising, then, that Alice ended up thoroughly confused! Similarly, changes in budget structure have caused uncertainty in many schools over recent years. Astute investment is increasingly important – but that in no way means that money can't be spent where it's needed, with current relevant software often a vital resource and therefore something to prioritise.

There are four simple steps the British Educational Suppliers Association recommends that schools should take to ensure wise investment in this area:

CREDIBILITY CHECK

All BESA's members must adhere to a code of practice that means their products must be of high quality, fit for purpose and with good support services. It is always worth having a quick search on BESA's website to ensure the company you are considering buying from is a member (besa.org.uk).

1 The first thing to consider is whether you already have a licence for software that will support your school's learning needs. The days of Curriculum Online and its eLearning credits resulted in many establishments possibly having more eLearning resources than they needed. Licensed software resources that no one in the school remembers purchasing are commonly found in cupboards in various classes and storerooms – a stock take is therefore an advisable annual activity that also helps avoid the risk of breaking licensing laws.

2 Think about establishing purchasing partnerships with other schools in your area. If a few other schools are looking for the same software, significant discounts can be achieved.

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3 Depending on the urgency of your requirement we always recommend attending shows such as Bett (30 January – 2 February 2013, London ExCel) and the Education Show (14 – 16 March 2013, NEC, Birmingham) where a number of software packages can be reviewed in one day. Staff from the suppliers will be on stand to answer your questions and negotiate any discounts so that you leave knowing you have fully assessed all the options.

4 Don't dodge the small print! The terms of the licence, level of support and the quality of the warranty are three important considerations to be made before purchase. If the software is accessed through online registration, how many users can have access to it at any one time? Annual licences hopefully offer the advantage of getting regular updates but schools will have to budget for a regular annual payment. What are the terms of this licence? Avoid being tied into a two or three year contract. And of course if the software stops working, will the supplier offer you new CDs, or a new login? Will they visit your school to fix the problem or doesn't the warranty cover such support?

It is BESA's belief that we all need rules to play the game, and it is a part of our mission to provide them. If we can avoid the confusion in procurement (and the hedgehogs!), then it will be to the benefit of all – supplier, purchaser and most importantly, the end users: your students.

★ **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

CAROLINE WRIGHT IS DIRECTOR AT THE BRITISH EDUCATIONAL SUPPLIERS ASSOCIATION (BESA).

KEEPING ON TOP

WHEN IT COMES TO EDUCATIONAL SOFTWARE PROVISION, EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS CANNY INVESTMENT, EXPLAINS SEANN GARDINER...

Schools are always looking for ways to save money – but at the same time boost the performance of pupils by using modern teaching tools such as computer applications and programs to enhance the classroom experience. However, the addition of these applications can make it a challenge for those who are tasked with keeping schools' IT systems secure and running smoothly.

There are three best practices to consider:

+ First, schools must prevent the installation of unlicensed programs onto their computers. It's a good idea to have a whitelist of applications that can be installed; this prevents teachers and pupils installing unapproved software on school machines. Managing this properly means reduced costs in the long run.

+ As Caroline Wright points out on the previous page, every school should know what software licenses it has, and how these are being used. A software inventory should be carried out regularly as this can help the IT department identify any unused licenses, so that software that is not needed can be eliminated or transferred. Rarely used software can also be evaluated to see if more value could be gained from it. Automating software license reporting saves time, and means you are always prepared for an audit.

+ Finally, it's important to keep approved software up to date, patched and secure. Implementing automated patching and software management processes can make this vastly easier.

Effective software management, that includes support for mobile devices too, can free up resources to concentrate on fulfilling other strategic IT goals. Whether it be tracking software usage and its distribution, or getting visibility of all software installed on the network, automating software compliance saves schools time and money. A more centralised, automated approach assists with enforcing license compliance and strips out inefficiencies, thereby helping educational establishments to operate more effectively.

Sean Gardiner is EMEA sales director at Dell KACE