

# A learned support operation

Staying at the cutting edge of information technology is vital for a successful educational institution such as the University of Exeter. With the helpdesk looking after the needs of 17,000 end-users, the time was recently deemed right to take an educational tour of the products available.

The central computing facilities at Exeter are managed by IT Services, a team of around 60 staff that look after the campus network, the University e-mail, web and dial-up services. It also configures and maintains a growing number of PC clusters accessible to all end-users, including the software applications that run on them. In addition IT Services also runs and maintains the main University Administrative Computing service and telephone system.

The University has two sites in Exeter, separated by about a mile. It also has a campus at the Camborne School of Mines based in Cornwall, around 90 miles from Exeter and several smaller sites at various locations in the South West.

All main campus student residences are now connected to the campus network with around 1,200 students registered for access. About 60% of all students now own a PC and many also have PCs at home and regularly access the University dial-up service.

Naturally this requires a huge support effort. "We tackle this by providing courses, documentation and helpdesk services," said Lee Davis, helpdesk software project manager, IT Services, University of Exeter. "We run a formal central helpdesk service for technical help during normal working hours all-year to field calls received in person, by telephone, by e-mail and via a web form. Other helpdesk points are available on the main campus. We also have a full-time helpdesk in Camborne and we have support teams placed in particular Schools to respond to calls for help passed from the centre," continued Davis.

## Decision Support Criteria

For 3 years the hardware maintenance team within IT Services had been using an incumbent helpdesk product for their specific needs.

"We decided rather than automatically use the existing package for wider helpdesk use, we would survey the market and evaluate alternative products with the package already used in-house," said Davis. "We had some exact requirements that included call logging and tracking, knowledge base generation, web access for our end-users and our staff, integration with remote control and a PC auditing tool.

"The University used an ageing, low specification, NT server as a test-bed during the evaluations. In order to comply with the requirements the system of choice clearly had to run on a central server and be accessible from anywhere on and off campus. At the time this seemed to imply either a purely web-based solution or a solution based on Microsoft NT and SQL server," concluded Davis.

After reviewing the specifications of many packages, IT services eventually settled on a short list of around five products. One was purely web-based, the others were conventional client-server products, including an enterprise version of the incumbent package. Two or three of the products on the list were already widely used in academic institutions.

"It was essential for us to be able to try the products in-house, on our own system, in our own time, without too much help from suppliers in setting the systems up." Explained Davis. "We reasoned if a system couldn't be installed and up and running quickly, it was probably more trouble than it was worth. We couldn't actually get one of the better known packages running at all and had virtually no support. To be honest it was getting difficult to make a decision as none of these packages fitted the bill and certainly not at the price we could afford. In general they were too complex and involved all kinds of 'add-ons' and extra modules for things like web access. The user interfaces for most of these systems were also quite poor and non-standard. I didn't want my colleagues to have to battle with a weird and cranky interface."

## Hornbill Makes The Grade

This all changed with the discovery of Supportworks from Hornbill Systems. It was downloaded from the Hornbill web site and the server and the client installed enabling testing after just a few hours. Supportworks only needed a standard TCP/IP connection so there was no need to fiddle around with a Microsoft database connector at the client end. The University was running with Microsoft SQL server as the database and it immediately took to the Office like interface of Supportworks. The 'Explorer-like' tree view of the whole support organisation includes end-users and any assets entered into the system. All work performed for each logged call is stored in one action diary, for easy access.

The system's 'quick-log' facility dramatically shortened call handling times. When certain queries crop up, like 'can you please reset my password?', the Supportworks quick log facility lets you set-up a template so such a call can be dealt with in seconds rather than minutes.

Supportworks has also been integrated into the central helpdesk mail account. As the Supportworks database is preloaded with user information, including e-mail addresses, incoming mail can be turned into a logged call with one click. Alternatively web SelfService allows end-users to login and submit calls directly to the central helpdesk team. Only one licence is needed to cover all possible end-user connections for this product.

When calls are closed they can optionally be added to the knowledge base. These are created as HTML files, so are instantly available via the web server. Being HTML it is possible to change the layout of these web pages via the template system provided. The 'knowledge base' within many other applications is usually in an internal format that often needs a separately priced module to gain access.

Supportworks use of open source components was a benefit to the University, Davis explains why. "This is a dream come true for us as we already have expertise in these products as we run them on our main University web servers. PHP (a web script creator) enables us to write scripts to interact directly with the customer and asset databases."



## Performance Was Key

"Performance is crucial and Hornbill truly has a winner here. We preloaded our database with details for all 17,000 users," said Davis. "To log a call you just enter the unique username and the rest of the information is filled in automatically and quickly. We are currently averaging around 10 concurrent client logins and there is no affect on performance. Over dial-up connections we use the full client, no need for a slower cut-down web version. The speed is much the same over conventional modem dial-up as it is on our LAN."

IT services has also deployed Hornbill's auditing product, Assetworks for IT asset discovery. The data collected merges into the Supportworks database so that it accessible from within the helpdesk system.

## Hornbill Completes The Course

"After our long-term evaluation, we were happy Supportworks, with all features taken into account, was superior to the existing system used in-house and at least as good as, if not better than all the other systems we evaluated, at a price we could afford.

"The quality of Hornbill's support from the beginning of our evaluation, through to everyday use has been excellent. Hornbill is always quick to respond, usually with an instant answer to our queries. The team at Hornbill really believe they are producing the best helpdesk on the market and their dedication and commitment reflects that."

"During the first academic term of live use the system has been 100% stable. All categories of staff, including reception and secretarial staff, front-line helpdesk staff and our second-line development staff have been able to use the system with very little training," concluded Davis.



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