Google™

CEnet embraces cloud collaboration for 330,000 educational users with Google Apps for Education

CEnet
catholic education network

At a Glance

What they wanted to do
- Quickly establish centralised resource for email and learning collaboration
- Ensure privacy of student information and guard student network access
- Establish foundation for ongoing feature updates and innovation
- Alleviate overhead and costs of on-premise solutions

What they did
- Mobilised Gmail, Google Docs, Google Groups, and Google Sites across 740+ locations and 330,000 users within two weeks

What they accomplished
- Supplied Google Apps for 330,000 users in a fortnight
- Enabled real-time collaboration among students and teachers
- Supported and enhanced teaching and learning innovation
- Focused on value-added IT activities

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—Ian Gregory, Manager of IT Systems, CEnet

Organisation
Catholic Education Network (CEnet) is a not-for-profit Information, Communication, and Learning Technology (ICLT) services organisation supporting 15 Catholic diocesan education networks that connect school communities across metropolitan, regional, and rural areas of New South Wales, Queensland, and the Australian Capital Territory. CEnet's user population includes more than 300,000 K-12 students and 30,000 teachers and staff across 740+ sites.

Challenge
Delivering collaboration and learning tools across many diverse individual sites and geographies is a major undertaking. According to Ian Gregory, Manager of IT Systems for CEnet, the sheer scale of the ICLT services delivered across its members is daunting, as are the technical, user management, business alignment complexities.

Expectations are continually rising as technology becomes more ubiquitous and advanced as a consumable resource. Students and staff expect unprecedented levels of sophistication, access, network speed, and ease of use. The goal for CEnet is to enhance teaching and learning through the use of contemporary media and technology – while at the same time minimising costs and maximising the value of services delivered.

"Students expect commensurate levels of technology in the classroom to those they have at home," says Robie Jayawardhana, ICT Administrator for the Diocese of Townsville. "And, as they move into the workplace, skills in the newest tools and technologies are a prerequisite."

To maximise value across the dioceses it serves, CEnet has built a central datacentre, equivalent to a private cloud. The datacentre supports a tiered delivery model capable of offering top-line, universally accessible services such as IaaS, SaaS and unified network access, as well as tailoring services to the unique technology needs of dioceses and individual schools. Email and web-based learning tools are basic elements underpinning these services.

Until recently, CEnet members equipped staff with email using multiple, on-premise systems. Students collaborated and shared information using a centralised, on-premise and proprietary solution that combined learning management, web content, and email features. The functionality of the incumbent, "all-in-one" system was no longer being updated to keep pace with growing feature requirements. CEnet also faced mounting risks and costs associated with maintaining the on-premise systems, including a significant amount of time required to administer on-site servers, apply constant software patches, and control user access – a vital factor in education.

"We needed to become more nimble by decoupling commodity services such as web-based collaboration and email from our existing Virtual Learning Environment. We wanted to host commodity services in the cloud," explains Frank Brooks, Consultant to CEnet.

Solution
CEnet completed an evaluation of various options. After narrowing the selection to two vendors, CEnet selected Google Apps as a hands-down winning solution. "Frankly, we were blown away by the functionality of Google Apps," says Gregory. "We loved the 'out of the box' feature set, but also were excited by the ability to augment Google Apps' functionality through the solutions in the Apps Marketplace."

Within two weeks, CEnet implemented Google Apps ready for the entire student and staff population of 330,000. Staff have the option to stay on existing diocesan mail systems, but most are choosing to migrate to Gmail or using existing and Gmail solutions side-by-side. Identity management integration was easily accomplished through Google Apps support for Security Assertion Markup Language (SAML), something that would not have been as easily accomplished had CEnet selected alternate options.

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Results
For CEnet and the dioceses and schools it serves, the benefits are many. Google's suite of solutions can be easily tailored to meet individualised needs. Most schools intend to use Google Docs, Google Sites, Gmail, and Google Groups. Some will apply Google Talk for instant messaging, while others will opt not to. Regardless, CEnet can tailor the Google Apps configuration centrally for any individual school with a few clicks.

Google Apps frees CEnet staff to focus on core business capabilities rather than commodity ICLT services. Google Apps also scales with ease to encompass hundreds of thousands of users. Maintenance costs and efforts have been reduced substantially, and 30-plus physical servers or virtual machines have been reduced down to just four for running the identity management integration components for Google Apps.

Google Apps is already having a substantial positive impact on teaching and learning across many schools. For end users, productivity is on the rise simply due to the fact that Gmail makes it easy to organise and search messages. For many, the light bulb turns on when collaborative learning projects can be edited in real-time on Google Docs or Google Sites across member dioceses and multiple facilities. Constant innovations from Google, which require no patches or hands-on IT staff time, are a welcome advantage.

Equally important, Google Apps is enabling the best ideas to bubble up and be shared. When schools in one diocese recently applied for Innovator Grants, the applications were posted to Google Docs. School principals signed on, read the proposals, and reviewed the criteria before approving the grants. The process revealed exceptionally inventive activities occurring among Australia's Catholic schools. "Google Apps is not only making us more efficient, but also is helping us enhance the teaching and learning experience across the entire CEnet community. Google is constantly innovating and, as a result, so are we," concludes Gregory.