Strathmore University chooses Google Apps to offer an improved learning experience

Organization

Strathmore University (www.strathmore.edu) is a leading private university based in Nairobi, Kenya. Established in 1961 as a sixth-form college, its 200-member academic staff now educates over 4,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students across a wide range of subjects including accountancy, administration, commerce, education, ethics, finance, management, and IT.

Challenge

Strathmore University prides itself on its ability to offer a first-class learning environment, which increasingly involves meeting the demands of its tech savvy student population. With students accustomed to using smartphones and the latest technologies in their personal lives, the university needed to tackle existing IT constraints and improve its technology capabilities without increasing its IT spend.

"Email is the primary means for the university to communicate with students. We used to run Microsoft Exchange, but due to our unreliable local broadband infrastructure and the cost of storage, it was becoming unsustainable," recalls Isaac Mbuthia, the Director of Strathmore's Information & Communication Technology Department. "Our email system was mainly being used by our staff. Students had mailboxes, but due to our system's small storage limits, they were using their personal accounts instead. This meant that lines of communication were not as effective as we wanted them to be and we lacked a collaborative learning environment. In addition, our server environment was at full capacity, which made us realise that moving to a hosted infrastructure for some of our applications was our only way forward."

"Not long ago we faced a daily struggle with our storage and network environment; we were unable to offer our users a better service because there was no room for innovation. Google helped us break out of this vicious circle and provide a platform that is easy to manage, easy to use and has endless possibilities for further innovation."
—Isaac Mbuthia, director of Information & Communication Technology Department, Strathmore University

Solution

Strathmore University chose to implement Google Apps for Education, which offers a high-capacity, low-bandwidth, cloud-based email solution and a host of innovative collaboration features, including Google Docs, Google Calendar and Google Sites.

Mr. Mbuthia explains that there were concerns that needed to be discussed prior to making the decision to move to a cloud model. "Cloud computing was a very new concept in this part of the world," he said. "The University's IT

Strathmore
U N I V E R S I T Y

At a glance

What they wanted to do:
- Create a more economically sustainable IT model
- Improve the reliability of IT infrastructure
- Offer students and staff a more collaborative learning experience

What they did
- Upgraded the network infrastructure with a Google Apps Supporting Program Infrastructure Grant and implemented Google Apps

What they accomplished
- Gave all students and staff a reliable email platform and the free use of innovative collaboration tools
- Began offering distance learning courses using Google Apps' tools

About Google Apps for Education

Google Apps for Education is a free suite of hosted communication and collaboration applications designed for schools and universities. Google Apps includes Google Mail (webmail services), Google Calendar (shared calendaring), Google Docs (online document, spreadsheet, presentation, and form creation and sharing), Google Video (secure and private video sharing — 10GB free) and Google Sites (team website creation with videos, images, gadgets and documents integration), as well as administrative tools, customer support, and access to APIs to integrate Google Apps with existing IT systems.

For more information, please visit:
www.google.co.ke/a/edu

For more information on Google Africa University Programs, please visit:
www.google.com/africa/ universityprograms/index.html

"Unreliable broadband was a real issue for us, so being able to build in redundancy has made a huge difference to our ability to offer a consistent and reliable service. The Google Apps Supporting Program Infrastructure matching grant and the technical consulting offered by Google were hugely important in helping us do this."
—Isaac Mbuthia, director of Information & Communication Technology Department, Strathmore University

Strategy Committee was concerned about the data and information security of moving to the cloud, while the IT department was concerned about migration from the existing platform to the new platform. In the end, all concerns were successfully addressed and the IT Strategy Committee made the decision to migrate to Google Apps. Tools provided by Google to aid in migration ensured that the process was completed in one week."

To improve the technology environment as a whole, Strathmore also implemented a fibre cable network infrastructure and added a second link from a local Internet Service Provider. In addition, to offer more mobility and flexibility to staff and students, it upgraded its wireless network on the university campus, with technical expertise from Google and funding from a Google Apps Supporting Program Infrastructure matching grant.

"Like many regions in Africa, unreliable broadband was a real issue for us, so being able to build in redundancy has made a huge difference to our ability to offer a consistent and reliable service," says Mr. Mbuthia.

Benefits

The move to Google Apps has given staff and students more freedom to learn, teach and socialise in a way that suits them, using technology with which they are already familiar. All students now have reliable and secure university email addresses that give them ample capacity to store documents. This means that emails with large attachments no longer get blocked and there is no longer a risk of emails going undelivered due to full in-boxes.

"From an IT perspective, moving to Google from Microsoft Exchange was a very straightforward and intuitive process. From a user perspective, we promoted the switch to Google by distributing banners and posters and by running a competition, but many were already familiar with the technology. Staff and students had started building Google Groups for email before we even implemented the full platform," explains Mr. Mbuthia, who also noted, "For many students, Google technology was already at the heart of their social and academic lives, so it was the obvious route to take."

The University has also started to formally integrate Google Apps into its course structure. It has launched a new e-learning MA course in Philosophy and Ethics, which means it is able to accept students from further afield, including those from Uganda and Tanzania. Course materials are shared electronically, and Strathmore is working on integrating the Moodle e-learning platform with Google Apps to improve information-sharing and collaboration. "We aim to offer our students an environment where they can learn according to their own schedule and Google Apps has given us the means to vastly improve this experience. Google's technology is flexible, so integrating it with third party applications is very easy," says Mr. Mbuthia. Mbuthia also says the University is working on integrating Google+ into its system to allow students to expand their networks to the wider world.

"Not long ago we faced a daily struggle with our storage and network environment; we were unable to offer our users a better service because there was no room for innovation. Google helped us break out of this vicious circle. We believe we now have a future-proof system that will enable us to maintain our position as a leading research university that provides excellence in teaching, facilities and the whole learning experience," concludes Mr. Mbuthia.