Knowledge Transfer Network

ICT

Case Study: Hillingdon Borough Council

By Gillian Law 30 January 2012

Take a look in any standard file system, and you'll find several versions of the same documents, updated and renamed whenever changes have been made. If those documents were created in collaboration with others, then those people will have their own versions of the same document - adding up to dozens of essentially the same data clogging up servers across the world.

That's one of the major pluses of a move to Google Apps, and a strong selling point when the London borough of Hillingdon chose the cloud-based service to provide its email, calendar, documents, word processing, instant messaging and voice and videoconferencing services. Naturally, the cost savings are a major benefit, too, but it was the improved collaboration capabilities that swung the decision making, says Councillor Jonathan Bianco, Hillingdon Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Business Services at Hillingdon.

Pontus Noren, CEO of Google reseller Cloudreach says that there is a huge interest in Google Apps among local authorities. Many are at a point where they need to replace email platforms that are reaching end-of-life, and Google's offering is "an extremely attractive option, for several reasons.

Migration from one on-premise infrastructure to another is quite complex and costly. Even with cloud based solutions other than Google Apps, many are very reliant on clients like Outlook. That ties the user tightly to a device, and puts pressure on IT departments to install, maintain and upgrade all these clients. One of the biggest costs in IT departments is having to image and reimage laptops and PCs. Whereas if it's on the browser, each user is self sufficient. Very few people work with one device today such as a stationary PC but will have laptops, smart phones and tablets. The users expect the same experience across all devices and Google Apps is the only device-agnostic solution in the market today," Noren says.

Hillingdon is the first UK local authority to move to Google Apps, with 3,500 users making the change. It is hoped this will bring savings of up to £3 million over the next four years.

The Hillingdon project is in the planning stages, Noren says, and key decisions have yet to be made. For most clients, however, Cloudreach recommends that users do not

transfer their older files to the new system. "It is possible to store all your older Word and Excel files in the Google infrastructure, but we recommend against it - you're really just transferring the problem of multiple versions of the same document. In most cases we see that, even where people do transfer older documents, they very quickly switch to using native Google documents as they discover the collaboration potential and the ease of use," he says.

Training in the use of Google Apps is "super easy", Noren says - usually taking one to two hours per member of staff, with more in-depth training available for users who will manage other people's email and calenders. "Even that only takes a couple of hours. As we say - people don't need training for YouTube! Software in the past was created by engineers for engineers, so it's full of buttons and functionality that no one uses. Google Apps comes with a different ethos, in that it's as simple and intuitive as possible."

Security is naturally a concern when local authorities consider cloud computing, but Noren says fears are quickly put to rest.

"Once we show the the security built into Google's systems they realise that they could never, ever achieve that level of security themselves. And then there's the fact that people aren't walking around with laptops and USB sticks full of sensitive data, just ready to be left on a train."

Cllr Bianco said: "Going with Google makes the most sense for Hillingdon economically and it will enable us to realise the tremendous opportunities afforded by cloud computing. Doing this means we're ahead of the curve in anticipating the changes in technology over the coming years. It also means we'll have more opportunities to look at how we communicate with local residents and organisations in the Borough, such as remote working. Simply, it makes both financial and business transformational sense to make the change."