

Portland College: Maximising Ability For Students With Physical Disabilities

Background

Inspired by the Duchess of Portland during the late 1940's to provide employment for ex-miners disabled as a result of mining accidents in the locality, or those who became casualties of the Second World War, Portland College is a national residential college for a wide range of people with physical disabilities.

Located in the heart of Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire, Portland is one of the foremost specialist colleges in the UK, providing first class education and training for students aged 16 and upwards. These days, it is a very different place to the small training establishment which first opened its doors in 1950, but the energy, drive, commitment and ability to challenge problems, and bring about change, is as strong as ever.

IT is a vital part of the college's curriculum and in particular it provides specialist Augmentative Assist Technology (AAT) to users. For example, enlarged keyboards make it easier for students to use the technology. The AAT keyboards are the size of four standard keyboards, protected with a large plastic frame and with much bigger keys to improve ease of use.

Understanding and knowing how to use technology is a pre-requisite within the college. It has a small IT team on campus, which takes responsibility for fixing problems, but most of the everyday queries are resolved by the students and teachers themselves.

Operating a large-scale site

Portland's IT team comprises of two technicians who look after nearly 500 PCs and laptops and support about 650 users. To assist in resolving technical support issues, Portland College uses leading help desk and IT asset management solution, Track-It! from Numara Software. On first glance this appears quite a tall order for two support professionals, but according to Tony Beastall, IT Manager for the college:

"We are a Microsoft Professional, Office and Cisco Academy and teach technology as part of our curriculum. We therefore have good technical skills among our employees who are able to assist each other. We get called to resolve the more pressing issues - normally when things don't work and the users have explored all the usual avenues. We are not a typical IT support desk, we don't get forgotten password requests or how can I do? etc, our role is to make sure the equipment and software is fully working and available 24/7. Servers are the main area we look after."



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The college has been a Numara Track-It! user since 2002 and during this time it has upgraded from version 5 to 7 and more recently to 8. Over the years one of the key selling points for the product has been the comprehensive inventory database which is completely automated, therefore everything relating to IT is electronically stored in one central location.

Additionally the management reports and self-service functionalities have been critical to the way the college operates its IT function. 200 users use self-service and 300 are accessible to the technicians by using remote control technology, providing the visibility and accessibility needed. Tony continues:

"Over the years, Numara Track-It! has been a great help to the College's support desk. The college is spread over a 38 acre site. Rather than spend several minutes walking from one part to another – with remote access capability, we can simply log on and solve a high proportion of user issues from the support desk without leaving the department. This functionality provides a faster response to our users and frees up our time to go and work on the more serious problems."

Enhancing productivity

Portland moved to Numara Track-It! 8 Enterprise when the new version was released in 2007. Numara Track-It! 8 Enterprise offers a comprehensive feature set; Help Desk, Solutions, Asset Auto Discovery, Inventory, Auditing, Software License Management, Reporting, and Security. This provided the college with the productivity enhancements that it was looking for. The Microsoft Outlook style 'look and feel' newly improved user interface (UI) was a significant improvement. As was the powerful solutions database which enables the college to store knowledge for the fast resolution of queries.

Now work order templates are automatically generated and assigned with no manual intervention required. The new service level business rules provide the flexibility to link a service level with any end-user, department, category or type and/or priority by defining work order event policies. Tony continues:

“With work orders systematically generated, we don’t have to spend time assigning tasks. The new home page and management dashboards enable us to better monitor performance and see ‘real-time’ requests as soon as they come in. The user gets an instant response stating that their problem has been received and a work order number is automatically attached.

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From an administration point of view, we can now request information across specifically required fields. Therefore, only when all the fields have been completed can the user send in their request, this saves us time in that we don’t go chasing around for missing information. We also use the audit feature to automatically report, for example, on how many versions of Microsoft Office we have.

Numara Track-It! 8 is linked to Microsoft Outlook so that when people email requesting help it automatically logs a support call which we can open and then go straight back to them via email. In isolation, each feature isn’t revolutionary but the sum total of all of these enhancements make it incredibly easy to use Track-It! 8 and has made for a far more efficient and responsive support process.”

Future plans

The college is currently looking at Numara™ Patch Manager so that it can completely manage the deployment of software patches quickly and easily. Once the college deploys Patch Manager it will be easy to scan, update and download patches for Microsoft Operating Systems and other applications across the entire network. Tony concludes:

“The support that we get from Numara Software is very good. If the ICT Support Desk require assistance, we contact them via phone and Numara are on hand to deal with my query. The productivity improvements and user enhancements in Numara Track-It! 8, particularly the Knowledge Database have made it even easier for users to track and resolve the more straightforward queries, while we deal with the more complex issues, delivering a win: win for all concerned.”



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About Numara Software

Founded in 1991, Numara Software is a global provider of service desk management solutions. Its flagship products, Numara Track-It! and Numara FootPrints, support over 50,000 customer sites worldwide making it the leader in this market for small to mid-sized enterprises.