How SeeAbility (Specialist registered charity supporting people who have multiple disabilities) moved to a cloud based mobile computing environment and saved money with a BrightCloud hosted and support Infrastructure as a Service

SeeAbility, UK (formally The Royal School for the Blind)

"BrightCloud has been managing our IT infrastructure for over 10 years. The initial project was a hardware refresh, but we found the team to be so attuned to our operational needs, and to know the products that they work with so well, that over time we have handed our entire IT infrastructure over to them.

"We now purchase our IT in much the same way we do our other utilities – as a service. We no longer have the capital, maintenance and upgrade costs, or the issues related to owning hardware and software assets. Instead, we have the latest, most resilient and secure virtual desktops, servers, data recovery, storage and applications available, delivered on tap by BrightCloud, at a fixed price.

"I truly believe that our IT infrastructure can now rival the biggest charities and most mid-sized businesses. There is no way we could have purchased, managed or maintained this scope of infrastructure or realised the operational benefits that our staff have reported without the support, knowledge and services provided by BrightCloud, now for over 10 years."

Brian Newcombe, Director of Finance and Property, SeeAbility.

Summary introduction

For over 10 years the charity, SeeAbility has trusted BrightCloud, the IT service arm of Open Reality, to design, build and manage its IT infrastructure and services.

SeeAbility is a specialist registered charity supporting people who have multiple disabilities, including visual impairment, learning and physical disabilities, mental health difficulties, acquired brain injury and life limiting conditions.

To do this effectively, its employees – nurses, therapists and rehabilitation practitioners need to be able to access case files, medical records and reference materials the moment they need them and, ideally, complete any related admin on the spot to ensure that no treatment plans or support changes are delayed.

There are over 35 properties and sites linked to SeeAbility. Additionally, a percentage of the people it supports lives independently and requires support in their own home. The introduction of virtual desktops has meant there is no need for staff to return to a base office. Instead they can log on to their actual desktop from anywhere, on any device when needed.

Over the last 10 years, BrightCloud has worked with the team at SeeAbility to evolve the IT infrastructure as technology has progressed. Initially it migrated the charity's PCs to virtual desktops and its servers before moving to hosted VMWare.

More recently, SeeAbility made the bold move from owning its IT estate to a fully managed and hosted infrastructure as a service (IaaS) model. This move to a monthly "lease" payment structure has delivered significant costs savings for the charity.

Perhaps the key message for other charity's and SMEs is that by outsourcing its IT infrastructure, SeeAbility is able to benefit from having an IT infrastructure, security, resilience and data recovery it could otherwise not afford.

SeeAbility Realises Cost & Operational Benefits of Advanced IT Infrastructure Financially Beyond its Means

- a Fully Hosted IT Infrastructure & Citrix Virtual Desktop Environment

- 'Infrastructure as a service' has removed capital costs and management time
- Virtual Desktop environment provides care workers with access to data and the tools needed to deliver excellent person centred care

BrightCloud was recommended to the charity SeeAbility by the Thomas Pocklington Trust in 2003, another charity that provides support services to adults with sight loss. Over time, Thomas Pocklington has outsourced its entire IT infrastructure and management to BrightCloud and SeeAbility could recognise the operational cost savings and efficiencies, both practical and financial, that this approach could offer the organisation.

However, as a charity, it was essential that BrightCloud could prove measurable returns on any IT investments made. It delivered a proof of concept that suggested similar capital cost savings and efficiency gains to those it delivered for Thomas Pocklington

The challenge: to use technology to extend the efficiency, scope and reach of its care services

The opportunity for SeeAbility to grow and extend its services was largely restricted by its outmoded local and largely paper-based administrative set-up. To move forward, it needed to introduce unified processes that could be centrally managed and securely accessed from anywhere, at anytime, by any authorised personnel.

The existing network was aging and offered no resilience. There was no scope for diagnostics and so it was hard to understand what was causing network failures or slow access. The cost of refreshing the hardware was also mounting up each year as the estate aged.

As an organisation providing vital life services SeeAbility needed to run efficiently and be free of risk. However, the IT team is bound by the charity's articles and memorandums and has to ensure that all purchases are justified and deliver a demonstrable benefit to the people using SeeAbility's services.

The solution: a staged approach to deliver a Citrix virtual desktop environment and VMWare, through to a full IaaS

BrightCloud designed an IT strategy that could not only meet these requirements, but ensure that there was an infrastructure in place to move the organisation forward. The charity had already grown from 10 to 35 sites and premises and it was likely that there would be further expansion of services.

How SeeAbility moved to a mobile cloud IT Strategy   3

The current estate comprises of virtual desktops and a complete hosted IT infrastructure as a service model. There was a natural progression through evolving technologies to reach this point of IT infrastructure quality and effectiveness. With IaaS in place developing technologies will be integrated seamlessly into the SeeAbility infrastructure as part of the service.

"By outsourcing the "mechanics" of our IT, day-to-day trouble shooting and helpdesk services we are able to focus purely on delivering and maintaining the IT applications essential to supporting the SeeAbility operation. This includes services to clients and those underpinning business processes including HR, marketing, finance and administration," explained Manlio Mannisi, IT Manager at SeeAbility.

Creating a Citrix virtual desktop environment

The first step was for BrightCloud to refresh the PC estate and to network it. The PCs were out of date and standalone. This was the first time the 35 remote offices, residential homes and supported living units had been connected.

The most immediate benefits were the introduction of shared services, the elimination of duplicate activities and the ability to share information and best practices.

The decision was made to provision a hosted Citrix virtual desktop environment. This enabled the central management of the PCs and all desktop applications. It also provided remote desktop services.

Benefits: cost savings and efficiency gains

Over night, cost and time savings were realised and staff immediately found that their time could be used more effectively to manage the needs of SeeAbility's clients and residents. It was also quickly realised that this foundation would support the charity's ability to grow.

The key benefit to the IT team was time saving and consistency. Where once there had been the need to visit each PC to upgrade, roll-out new software or to establish an issue, these tasks could now be completed from a single location and in most instances, simultaneously.

For staff, the major benefit was being able to access their familiar desktop from any access device, in any location at any time.

The IT investment was eliminating duplicate costs and employees were reporting that they were better able to focus on person centred care rather than administration, which had previously been a burden due to the impracticalities of the old IT set-up.

Creating a virtual environment

The next logical step was to rationalise the server environment, both to cut costs and to increase resilience and security. In 2007, the six servers, which previously had to be accommodated at the charity's headquarters, were rationalised into three and hosted by BrightCloud.

This move ensured the servers were managed, monitored and maintained to the highest degree and were kept in the ultimate environment for this type of equipment. The business and operational case was quite simply one of risk reduction and removal of all single points of failure.

Converting CAPEX to OPEX & eliminating depreciation

When the time came to upgrade the servers two years later, it was decided to make the move from physical servers to virtual VMWare servers. This introduced a reduction in capital costs. SeeAbility no longer owned the servers, but rented them, shifting all payments to an operational cost. This also eliminated running and maintenance costs outside of the monthly rental charge.

"With the hardware coming up for review the business case did not add up to invest in physical servers. A physical environment would depreciate and with the speed of technical development, fast become outdated," explained Brian Newcombe, Director of Finance and Property at SeeAbility.

"BrightCloud presented the clear case for a VMWare investment. The virtual server would sit in its datacentre and transfer a potential capital cost to an operational cost, which made sound business sense to us. It also meant that we could have a more advanced and evolving infrastructure," continued Brian Newcombe.

Moving into the cloud

By this point, the level of trust between BrightCloud, Brian Newcombe and Manilo Mannisi was high and a very progressive relationship had been established.

"We found there to be a good mix of technical knowledge, complemented by people who understand how to deal with the customer," said Brian Newcombe.

Where many organisations were still reluctant to trust the cloud, Brian and Manilo were keen to consider a proposal from Andy Grover, Technical Director at BrightCloud that would see the charity's entire IT infrastructure hosted in the BrightCloud Cloud.

"We were interested in the concept of IT as a utility, but we needed to better understand how our virtual infrastructure would be ring fenced from others and our highly sensitive data protected," explained Brian Newcombe.

Progressive IT infrastructure

SeeAbility was very progressive in its decision to convert its entire IT infrastructure to a platform that would see its IT delivered as a service (IaaS). This move required a huge leap of faith by SeeAbility. To ensure the successful delivery of the project, a dedicated project manager from BrightCloud was appointed and a detailed structure and project plan was put in place. This ensured accountability and a blueprint for delivery.

"There was some nervousness initially, but we were confident that BrightCloud would deliver the best outcome for us and they did. By outsourcing our IT there is less for us to worry about and our IT infrastructure is effectively a utility, a true business enabler," said Brian Newcombe, Director of Finance and Property at SeeAbility.

Complete project visibility

Total project visibility was guaranteed using Citrix Podio, the social collaboration tool. This allowed all parties involved in the project to build apps and to set-up workspaces with workflows. It was also used it to ensure two-way communication between everyone involved in the project.

"The process ran smoothly. There were no hick-ups and BrightCloud's initiative to use Citrix Podio meant we knew exactly how the project was progressing at each point and potential issues could be identified before they manifested," explained Brian Newcombe.

Next steps

The next steps are to extending the existing BrightCloud managed service from infrastructure only to the application layer. On the successful roll-out of this, all Microsoft licences will be migrated to service provider versions.

This will introduce a monthly billing model for applications, as well as infrastructure. This will this ensure that users always the latest version upgrades and security fixes as they are released.

BYOD on the horizon

As new services provided by SeeAbility continue to be introduced, its workforce is becoming increasingly mobile. The charity has discussed the opportunities of BYOD with BrightCloud and it is seen as being ideal for some roles. Those highlighted as being key beneficiaries include managers of the homes, cluster managers, who can drive up to 40,000 miles a year, estate managers, speech and rehabilitation team members and the management team.

"We are increasingly being asked by staff about BYOD. The benefits, particularly for staff working in the community, are clear. What we need to look at is the best way to manage the data on these devices and how we can ring fence this to ensure that we are compliant with the Data Protection Act. As our long-term IT partner, BrightCloud is advising us on a BYOD

policy and the steps we take to a gradual move to total mobility for employees," explained Brian Newcombe.

Over all benefits of the VDI and IaaS environment: Enhanced care services, significant cost savings and management free, future-proofed IT

The introduction of a virtual desktop environment has had the most impact on SeeAbility employees. They can log on from anywhere, on any device and be presented with their own familiar desktop. The charity also has the most highly specified and resilient network available to an organisation of its size.

"There is no way we would have had the capital budget to purchased an IT environment as advanced as this ourselves, or have the resources and skills in-house to design, deliver and then manage it on a day-to-day basis," explained Brian Newcombe.
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"Our employees have responded positively to the virtual desktops, which provide guaranteed access to the applications they need to do their jobs. The hosted infrastructure provides us with absolute peace of mind. We know that any server, application or network fault will never impact us. The issue is BrightCloud's and invisible to us. This leaves us 100% able to concentrate on the valuable services that we offer to some of the UK's most vulnerable people," concluded Brian Newcombe.

Key Benefits

- Highest specified IT infrastructure at a fraction of a cost
- Progressing and evolving hardware and software environments
- Transfers cost from CAPEX to OPEX budgets
- Complete network resilience and data recovery guaranteed
- Enables mobile and flexible shared working
- Creating foundations for move to BYOD policy
- 100% day-to-day focus on the running of the charity
- Increased employee efficiency
- Extended services to clients
- Introduces internal shared services and best practices

About SeeAbility

SeeAbility is a specialist registered charity supporting people who have multiple disabilities, including visual impairment, learning and physical disabilities, mental health difficulties, acquired brain injury and life limiting conditions.

Formally The Royal College for the Blind, SeeAbility has specialisms acquired over 200 years and is leading its field. Its proven holistic approach addresses the psychological, physiological and emotional needs of each person and this takes experience, highly trained staff, dedication, patience and shared knowledge. SeeAbility provides residential, supported

living and day services to people living throughout Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Devon, Hampshire, Kent and Surrey.

SeeAbility currently provides services in Devon, East Sussex, Hampshire, Somerset and Surrey.

For Further Information

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