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Robert Irving,
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University of Sharjah

ENGINE ROOM

UNIVERSITY OF SHARJAH RETURNS THE SERVICE DESK TO THE CENTRE OF IT AND ITS USER COMMUNITY

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" We are not for profit, but we are not for loss either."

Robert Irving, director of IT, University of Sharjah

Case study

Engine room

University of Sharjah returns the service desk to the centre of IT
and its users, with help from ManageEngine

When Robert Irving, current director of IT at the University of Sharjah, joined the institution in January last year, his immediate goal was to improve the student and staff experience.

His previous employer, a top-tier university in Australia, had been ranked top in Australia and New Zealand for the student support experience; Irving desired the same outcome in Sharjah for the 14,500 students and 2000 staff members at the university.

An ideal starting point was to transform the service desk, typically the chief point of interaction between IT and the user community. An effective service management system ensures the IT team can provide services that are consistent and of high quality.

Shifting from the current service desk hosted on-premise to a platform delivered on cloud would allow IT to free up resources to get better value for its customers, says Irving.

But first, the institution wanted to reinvigorate its existing service desk which had fallen out of sync over time.

BUSINESS NEED

Tasked with reinventing the service desk is Omar Harara, the service desk manager at the University.

Reinventing the service desk meant putting the service desk at the heart of IT where it belongs, says Harara. "Our main objective was to provide a clear path for users to report incidents, request and inquiries," says Harara.

The first objective was to get users to go through the service desk when they had IT issues they needed resolving instead of approaching the I.T. staff directly. The result has been a sharp rise in phone calls to IT, the (desired) effect of users going through the service desk.

Once that number levels off, the new target will be to get the calls down by identifying the problems users face and then fixing those problems once and for all. Irving says he will be happy to see calls to service desk reduced by 50% over five years.

"We need to make sure that the service desk experience is a good one to encourage users to go through the system."

Eventually, Irving and his team would like to enhance the capabilities of the user community so they eventually rely on the service desk less and less. "The service desk will always be there to a certain degree, but the more we can empower them the better it will be for them," he adds.

The work done to reinvent the service desk is paying off. The ManageEngine-based service desk platform has now evolved, says Harara. "The service desk today is not only involved with resolving incidents and requests; we are now transforming our service desk from technical-centric to service-centric. We are now starting to understand the business needs through increased communicating with the business. A key part of this process is to receive more feedback from the business on one hand and providing our ideas to the management to improve our services on the other," says Harara.

The service desk has also become the main communication channel with users. Users are now going almost exclusively through the service desk to talk to IT and vice versa. "The service desk is now the hub of communication. The system is now also the coordination point even between the different I.T. teams. We have a large department with around 75 employees. If there is a request which should be fulfilled between two sections within the department it is now communicated via the service desk," says Harara.

The system is also able to break down

14,000
Student body at UOS

SUMMARY

Objective

The University of Sharjah wanted to upgrade its service desk environment, without the complexity and hardware overlay of an on-premise deployment. It turned to a familiar product, ManageEngine Service-Desk Plus Enterprise edition, a software that will help the university on its journey to transform the student and staff experience.

Solution

ManageEngine ServiceDesk Plus Enterprise edition combines the classical help desk with ITIL, asset and project management delivered as a SaaS. It incorporates incident management, problem management, change management, IT project management, service catalogue, asset management and CMDB.

Results

The university wants to reduce its hardware footprint by turning to cloud applications and managed services. ManageEngine Service-Desk Plus Enterprise, the University of Sharjah can fire up its service desk without the associated complexity.

↑ The university is now in the process of shifting from the current ManageEngine Service Desk hosted on site to an Enterprise Service Desk delivered as SaaS on the cloud.

statistics on staff utilisation of IT services. "For example, if employee X is averaging five requests per day and another employee with the same job description averages one, there's clearly an issue that needs to be addressed. The system helps me identify what the specific problems are," says Harara.

Another effect of the improvement of the service desk is the growth of cross-functional capabilities, says Harara. "Our main resolution is to transform the service desk team to be a cross-functional that, although we may not necessarily possess deep technical knowledge, have a broad understanding of context; when we receive a call, we can provide users with first-call resolution," he adds.

BUSINESS BENEFIT

The university has been using ManageEngine since 2014, with positive feedback on the product all-round.

Harara says ManageEngine differentiates itself on to its simplicity. "It's a very easy-to-use product and very user-friendly. It does not require any special implementation. It also offers enhanced support for business rules and supports workflow and our processes."

ManageEngine was thus an obvious choice when upgrading to the enterprise SaaS model. The university is now in the process of shifting from the current

50%
Ideal rate for calls to drop

ManageEngine Service Desk hosted on site to an Enterprise Service Desk delivered as SaaS on the cloud. "We are on a journey to digitise our environment and move from technology services to information services," says Irving.

ManageEngine meets the needs of the university. "We're trying to move away from managing applications; what we want to do is provide services to make sure people can get the information and the capabilities that they need," says Irving.

"Swapping out hard drives and in-

> " "The service desk today is not only involved with resolving incidents and requests; we are now transforming it from technical-centric to service-centric."

Omar Harara, the service desk manager, University of Sharjah

The software will continue to be upgraded over time as well, so it will stay ahead of whatever capabilities we will require in the near future," says Irving.

The service will be able to serve a core IT team of around 50 as well as other IT personnel in the other business areas numbering 70. The university spent around 100,000 AED for the software, which Irving says was considerably cheaper than the other platforms.

There's a cultural shift as well as a skills development curve that goes with such an implementation. "Culturally

whenever change is planned, there will be concerns especially around jobs. I've been through the exact same process at my previous university; when I started a similar process, there was initial pushback over the risk of job losses. But at a time of my departure from the university, pretty much everyone who was there when we started the process was still there. And the staff appreciated coming into a working environment that was much more efficient," says Irving.

The ManageEngine application is very easy to use and practical, says Ir-

stalling operating systems was something that had to be done ten years ago, but it's not something we have to do anymore. So why should we?" says Irving.

For the maturity of the University, ManageEngine has all the capabilities the institution needs and more, says Irving. And the cost model for it is very attractive as well, he adds.

"Like similar universities, we are not for profit, but we are not for loss either. So we're trying to find the right tools that meet our needs, allow us to do our jobs properly but allows us to grow as well," says Irving.

"Based on that, I can say that the ManageEngine Enterprise Service Desk has the capabilities that more than meets our needs for the next three to five years.

THE CLIENT

The University of Sharjah is an Emirati private national university located in University City, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. It was established in 1997 by its founder, president and chairman, the ruler of Sharjah Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi to meet the emirate of Sharjah's aim of educational needs. In addition to its main campus in Sharjah City, the university has built campus facilities to provide education and training programs directly to several communities throughout the emirate. The University of Sharjah extends its services through three branches located in different geographic areas in the emirate of Sharjah such as Khor Fakkan, Kalba, Dhaid.

> " We are on a journey to digitise our environment and move from technology services to information services."

Robert Irving, Director of IT, University of Sharjah

ving. "I don't anticipate any challenges with the implementation and eventually when it is running, which is important because I don't want to be spending time on that application; I want to spend time working on my customers' applications," says Irving.

ManageEngine is aligned with ITIL (Information Technology Infrastructure Library), so it supports service catalogue, request process, incident manage-

ment, problem management and change management, explains Harara.

The university maintains a relatively small team for the number of users, so the more automation capabilities the better, says Irving.

"The use of bots and artificial intelligence is going to be very transformational for us as a department in the way we provide services. Rather than picking up the phone, users will want to use chatbots which can offer a better customer experience. And the more we can push those channels the better the services will become," says Irving.

The university operates with both a centralised and decentralised IT staff. Around 50 are centred within the IT department with another 25 embedded with the various business departments. "In the future, a decision will be made whether the latter should stay within the business as they understand what the business complications are and how to fix them or bring them on-board to get more integrated into the support that we're providing," says Irving.

Security is one of the biggest worries for any CIO. "We recently hired an assistant director who oversees cybersecurity. As far as the ManageEngine platform is concerned, I know that it meets all the key security standards. So that doesn't worry me," Irving says.

For example, the software has ring-fenced the HR module to ensure that the data therein is protected and closed off even to the IT staff.

FUTURE

Ultimately, the university wants to shift all the applications it can to the cloud.

"Everything we can move to a SaaS model we will, and then we can move down the cloud stack from there if we need to. Some other applications will be turned to managed services whenever that is the more effective option. We are in the process of moving our key finance system to a managed service, as well as exploring at having our HR system delivered via a SaaS model if possible. We're also looking to move the Blackboard learning management platform to a SaaS model. The website will also be shifted to a SaaS model from on-prem."

"The actual amount of time we have to spend managing these applications will be massively reduced and we can spend that time looking after the customer," says Irving.

Eventually, Irving would like the university get rid of the in-house data centre altogether, shifting to a colocation site with a much-reduced workload. "The quality of a data centre that we can put together is nowhere near a Tier 3 that we would get from a colocation provider. So if we want to make sure the services we're providing are highly available and reliable we need to make sure the underlying platform supports that. At that point, a primarily SaaS environment will require a very low hardware footprint with vendors doing much of the heavy lifting," says Irving

Managing devices and applications is especially challenging in a university setting, with a huge range of different devices and operating systems from students and staff, which presents a unique set of challenges.

Irving says the university would like to start managing this bring your own device (BYOD) environment, for instance, by starting to provide antivirus software to students. "We would also like extend the benefits of BYOD more broadly among the staff by either providing an institutional laptop or offer financial remuneration so they can purchase their own device and then through VDI they can get access to corporate applications and environment," he adds.

THE VENDOR

ManageEngine started business in 1996 as AdventNet, a network management company. In 2003, ManageEngine became a division of Zoho Corporation, focused IT management products. Today, ManageEngine offers more than 90 tools to help organisations manage their IT operations, including networks, servers, applications, service desk, Active Directory, security, desktops, and mobile devices.