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People-led innovation enabled by IT.

IT-enabled Business Innovation Case Study:

Online educational publishing innovation by a technical studio team.

Prepared by: Alison Freer, Director - Lead & Transform

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Introduction

Company Overview

This leading publisher is a player in key markets in the UK and overseas. Over the last few decades, the business has developed a robust portfolio of online assessments and its successful assessment portfolio is complemented neatly by its unique range of management resources and training opportunities, designed specifically for schools. Over the last decade, the business has grown its capacity considerably and has now delivered millions of online tests to customers and users in the UK and in a huge number of countries worldwide.

The business operates in locations across the UK, including one site hosting a dedicated Technical Studio for a team of around 25 developers and technical customer support specialists. The Technical Studio is the focus of this case study.

Business Context

There is a range of products in the company's portfolio of online assessments. One key software platform is used to deliver of online tests to customers across the world. This operating system has been one of the most significant technological innovations for the business and for the markets they serve. As a result of implementing this platform, the company is now able to deliver its full range of on-line assessments and is also able to bring new assessment products on-line, and to market, very rapidly.

Customers and users of the online assessments have come to rely on the data generated to inform development of appropriate intervention strategies in their own organisations and with their own key stakeholders. The business' key customer groups operate in highly regulated environments and recent changes in government policies in the UK and abroad has further focused interest in these key areas.

A more recent online tool launched by the company enables senior managers in customer organisations to track and manage their key performance data so that they can demonstrate their effectiveness at resource and performance management as well as having full visibility of their own milestone and improvement plans. Customers also use the platform to produce their own performance reports to deliver to governing and other regulatory bodies.

The company's full product portfolio currently contains nearly 100 different testing platforms and products. The portfolio is being added to regularly as new needs are defined by key customer groups in the UK and overseas. International sales are growing rapidly and the company is currently involved in a number of partnerships with overseas agents.

Innovation Drivers

The business' key innovation drivers are:

- To maximise domestic UK market opportunities in online assessment to enable customers to demonstrate their effectiveness against key milestones;
- To support the growth of international sales in the UK and increased uptake of online assessments and performance tracking;
- To capture overseas markets through strategic partnerships and being able to deliver online products across international boundaries, in different languages and across international time zones;
- To secure the current customer base as long-term subscribers and establish firm technological foundations to support the annual increases in business growth for the foreseeable future.

Enablers of Innovation

The business has been transformed as a result of investing in online assessment solutions. For a business whose roots are in paper-based publishing, this has been a natural evolution and the significant growth in business in recent years has been made possible by the smart use of technology.



1. **Skills Mix** - The company has invested significantly in its Technical Studio team and a conscious policy was adopted to recruit people with the right mix of technical development and technical operational experience. The intellectual property development is largely driven by highly focused research, sales and marketing activity with strong input from technical experts from the Studio team. All the technical staff make a conscious effort to keep up to date and many are involved in coding 'for fun' outside of work.

2. **Leadership & Team Development** - In 2008-2009, the Studio Management Team decided to invest in staff development for the team in order to realise greater potential from the existing skills and experience mix. Over the course of 15 months, senior studio manager and team leaders engaged in a programme of 1:1 mentoring and training workshops delivered by Lead & Transform. The development programme build the Studio Team's capacity and confidence to take a lead on product, business process and customer service improvements. The programme also provided forum where leadership challenges could be constructively addressed and strategies defined.

3. **Flat Structure** - With employees across three sites, the company is big enough to have credibility with customers and yet it's also small enough to behave in an 'agile' and responsive way.

"Everyone knows who's who here", says the IT Service Delivery Manager. "Our MD is very accessible and he gives quick authorisation of valid ideas if it's to do with what customers want."

4. **Co-located Technical Team** - Having a co-located technical team also helps. Developers and customer support staff work side by side and can respond quickly to customer queries and issues.

5. **Constantly Monitoring Customer Feedback and Forums** - There is constant and instantaneous monitoring of customer issues and requests so that issues are diagnosed and fixed as quickly as possible.

"When a customer has 30 people waiting to use our tests in a room, they need to know that any issues can be fixed right there and then," says the IT Service Delivery Manager. "We have our Operational Team to respond to any issues and to guide our customers to fix as much as they can themselves."

The business' platforms are more stable and secure than ever before and the interfaces are easier and friendlier for users, so many of the problems encountered by users have been down to their own local issues.

6. **Customer 'Radar'** - The Studio Team makes sure they are constantly in touch with the most active user forums so they can quickly act and respond to any issues raised.

7. **'Design Thinking', Refining User Experience** - One idea successfully applied by the Studio developers, working together with their customer support colleagues, was to incorporate an instant feedback button within their main products. When a user hits the button and registers feedback, an email is instantly triggered to the IT Services Manager. The customer gets a response within 12 working hours. User interfaces and experience of using the products is crucial, so design is now more important than ever for the business' products and platforms. As the business' success has grown in delivering online assessments, the company's leaders have recognised more than ever, the importance and value of interface design. As such, this is a key consideration for the Studio team in any new product or release.

"We look at things like what people tell us about download times, sometimes even 30 seconds can seem too long for some. And we help our users to adhere to some of their local authority regulations about protection and data security. If they're not permitted to download MP3 files, we'll enable a format that is endorsed."

8. **Involvement in New Product Development Strategy** - The company regularly holds strategy away days for mixed groups of people across the business. These away days involve a mix of relevant experts from across the business and are designed as creative, interactive sessions where new product and service ideas are generated. Collective voting determines priorities for action and then the raw ideas are applied to the AGILE and ITIL frameworks to take the concepts to fruition.

9. **A Technical Team with Influence** - The internal credibility and profile of the Technical Studio has grown within the business over the years. Studio leaders have made a conscious effort to strengthen relationships and contact with colleagues in other disciplines and business centres to ensure early involvement in planning and decision making. The Studio Team is valued for its detailed understanding and knowledge of customer experience and feedback. As the key delivery channel for products is increasingly online, the Board now appreciates more than ever before, the need for early involvement of the Studio Team. In parallel, Studio Leaders and team members have grown in confidence and belief in the value of what they deliver. These strong internal relationships are very much the foundation of the business' capacity to innovate to deliver business value.



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10. **Striking a Balance Between Structure and Flexibility** - The Studio Team has a range of industry experience from the highly structured, centrally controlled management structures of large multi-nationals to the organic, just-do-what-you-need-to-do ethos of entrepreneurial start-ups. The IT Service Delivery Manager firmly believes in a third way: that is that occupying the middle ground between these two extremes is the best approach to leading a productive technical team.

"We aim for a healthy balance between good housekeeping and keeping it agile."

Innovation for the Future

As the business continues on this growth curve, it's clear that IT enabled innovation is crucial to future success. Having laid some firm foundations in recent years, the technical team has earned its place as enabler of business innovation. A key challenge for the Studio team will be to retain the current levels of agility whilst also successfully scaling the technical platforms, and supporting a more geographically and culturally diverse range of customers and business delivery partners.

Already, by focusing on some of the key innovation enablers, the business has achieved a decline in customer support call traffic, despite significant increases in users. So the next business innovation to explore is how to expand successfully, whilst consolidating current key customer markets. In this company it seems that whilst IT is the enabler of scale, it's the people and the collaborative working practices that ensure that 'ideas are successfully applied'.



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Contact Information

Lead and Transform IT Limited

Regus House
4 Admiral Way
Doxford International Business Park
Sunderland
SR3 3XW

Company Registration Number: 07115698

VAT Registration Number: 993689441

www.leadandtransformit.com

T: 0191 501 8550

M: 07779 669 620 (Alison Freer)

E: alison@leadandtransformit.com

Twitter: @leadtransformIT