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Maximising collaboration

in the UK's schools.

Summary.

Developing a digital strategy across schools is more important now than ever. Budget pressures, the need for the continuity of teaching and learning, navigating a global crisis and the growing appetite for innovation are all encouraging schools to migrate away from legacy telephony to cloud communications. The opportunities of resources and infrastructure that allow for communication and collaboration across schools is far-reaching, enabling teaching and learning irrespective of the teacher/pupils' location or device.

In this paper, we will discuss some of the current challenges and opportunities being experienced in schools across the UK, exploring how NFON's cloud communications tools can address some of education's major pain points.

A key recommendation of the Government's EdTech Strategy is for schools and colleges to actively consider the benefits of moving to cloud-based IT systems. With the ISDN switch off approaching, cloud communications is now a high priority.

NFON's cloud communications supports the digital transformation of schools in the following five key areas:

1. Effective Communication

Interaction and communication between teachers, parents and pupils. All communications across MAT's should allow for the:

- Routing of callers
- Transcription of calls
- Sharing calls answering with a 'buddy'
- Group Voicemail email addresses
- Effective absenteeism process

2. Staff Support

Teachers and administrators have heavy workloads, traditional phone lines are constantly busy and demand on staff to answer and deal with queries is high. With cloud communications, staff workloads are eased. Benefits include:

- Make calls using a 'softphone'
- Maintain staff privacy
- Remove reliance

3. Site Communication

Interact and send messages across your school, keeping all relevant personnel updated. Cloud communications allow for:

- Broadcasting of clear instructions
- Changing and adding of recorded messages remotely

4. Budget Control

Communication tools need to alleviate the ongoing financial issues being experienced within schools. Technology needs to help balance school budgets. Moving away from legacy phone systems and utilising cloud-communication tools is a cost-effective option as it is possible to:

- Control costs
- Reduce maintenance and hardware costs
- Avoid high mobile call charges

5. Safeguarding & Duty of Care

The National Education Union has highlighted concerns over teachers phoning pupils at home when pupils, for any reason, may not be in school. Communication policies and clear safeguarding advice need to be followed. For example, the use of personal phones and devices has emerged as a top safeguarding issue. Effective cloud communications should:

- Store confidential recordings of calls
- Manage phone numbers

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Digitally achieving educational excellence.

Education is at the heart of our government's agenda and the ambition of the Department for Education (DfE) is to achieve 'educational excellence everywhere'. Developing great schools with great teachers and helping every child achieve their full potential, the DfE also recognise the importance of raising standards by providing confidence for not only children, but parents too.

The DfE's programme is ambitious with a mission to align all of its essential functions, from funding to control, responsibility and accountability, all in one place. Ensuring that schools can collaborate in a system that is responsive to changing needs is a core focus.

To achieve these goals, every school needs to be equipped with the best tools needed to succeed. Whilst good progress has been made in recent years, the UK school system still has a long way to go.

Achieving educational excellence is not currently being felt across the whole country; there remain areas of chronic underperformance, where low standards are being impaired by a lack of capacity and tools required to improve.

Changing governmental policy and unprecedented global events have dramatically changed educational settings and issues around funding, workloads, teacher retention and parent engagement have emerged as major concerns. The bedrock of achieving the DfE's goal to bring the whole school system together where no one gets left behind is to ensure schools have the capability to effectively collaborate and communicate.

As UK schools are so diverse, it's important to recognise that there is no standardised, one size fits all solution. However, a good place to start in addressing education's challenges is to implement digital tools that enable teachers, parents and stakeholders to communicate, innovate and work in partnership to help drive up standards together.

Taking opportunities to collaborate can also support making financial efficiencies through shared procurement, sharing of staff through moves and secondment and learning from best practice from other schools. When schools work together, rather than in silos, strategies for improvement can also be realised to meet localised challenges through the sharing of professional expertise and the efficient pooling of resources.

Deeper levels of transformation are required for the UK's schools that can translate into tangible changes in practice, culture and processes, ultimately improving outcomes for pupils, who stand at the very heart of the educational experience.

As the starting point for a positive school ethos and to build a climate of trust and transparency, whole school communities, including parents, pupils and staff, need to be able to participate in and around school life. When a culture of parental participation and stakeholder engagement is established, true transformation can begin.

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Giving parents a voice.

"Ofsted should build on its research and take action to engage more with parents and make inspection reports more useful to parents."[1]

Parents and teachers want the same thing: for children to thrive and reach their potential, to be happy and to have a rounded education. Parents are integral to ensuring the success of this.

Building strong relationships between parents and schools is a top factor in positive pupil outcomes but, without the right understanding and resources, building those relationships can be difficult.

There are various reasons why parent-school relationships suffer, but having an effortless, immediate and flexible way of communicating with schools is a strong place to start to address this disconnect and improve day-to-day interactions.

Reaching all parents begins with meeting them where they are emotionally. They may have varied feelings about family-school partnerships or have other priorities (such as health issues) in their lives. Emotionally meeting families where they are requires empathy, asking questions, and sharing that you have a common interest in their child's education. Without a hassle-free way of facilitating communication, the opportunity to foster empathy is lost which is detrimental to the parent, the school and the pupil.

Knowing how influential parents are in pupil

outcomes, implementing the tools, to help give parents a voice will bring significant benefits to UK schools. Maximising on the opportunities to engage and involve as many parents as possible and in a seamless way will support the forging of positive partnerships to achieve the school's mission and drive improvement.

As Ofsted assesses schools on their engagement with parents, every school needs to respond to parents and offer tailored communication channels to suit their unique preferences and needs, regardless of the device they have access to and irrespective of the location of individual parents.

The importance of treating parents as partners in education and ensuring that positive partnerships between home and school are strong is integral to every school's success.

"Parents are extremely important to Ofsted and we listen carefully to what they say to us, both during inspections and outside of this. We engage with parents regularly in many different ways to help us do our job better – and so to help us raise standards in education for everybody."

Sean Harford, National Director (Education) Ofsted

1 The National Audit Office's 2018 report into Ofsted's inspection of schools

Consolidating infrastructure in schools.

When engaging in dialogue around school technology infrastructure, conversations usually focus on 'digital education' and how technology can support learning. However, IT infrastructure in schools can go far beyond the sole purpose of upgrading and innovating the delivery of teaching. Innovating communications and collaborations with technology requires consideration as it can bring a whole host of benefits to schools, in line with the DfE's mission.

For example, traditional communications systems in schools are built on legacy telephony infrastructure, which is limiting and requires unnecessary and time-consuming human intervention. Some legacy systems are no longer fully supported, making it difficult for internal IT teams to fix or amend system issues. Legacy technology also has the disadvantage of being less agile than modern solutions, which is hugely detrimental to schools who require systems, processes and operations to support meaningful collaboration that schools so urgently need.

In any one school office, there are limited numbers of staff to manage incoming telephone calls. A parent may require school contact due to concerns about their child or they may simply need information about a school event or a request to meet a teacher for a face-to-face meeting.

Traditional communication systems are unable to efficiently handle incoming calls so, for example, if a parent is unable to get through to their child's school, they are forced to call repeatedly until their call is answered. This can be frustrating, especially for working parents with limited time. This can all have a negative impact on how a parent feels about the school and is also challenging for office staff with heavy workloads. Concentrating on improving and consolidating infrastructure should be a priority for every school to empower them to work in smarter, more effective ways.

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Engagement in a time of remote learning.

The rapid shift to cloud-based virtual learning and communications is having a profoundly transformative impact on education. Schools can, with technology, use their resources to build resilience, agility and scalability as they deliver education in the future and thrive post-COVID.

Possibly, one of the most prominent requirements for schools that has emerged in recent times is in the area of remote learning.

The onset of the global pandemic, COVID-19, saw the temporary shutdown of schools all over the world. Schools were forced to quickly launch virtual learning. Digital technology has supported schools to continue teaching, supporting teachers to give more effective feedback through systems that can also motivate and engage pupils and keep parents connected in a challenging time. The speed and scale of virtual learning would not have been possible without world-class cloud-based infrastructure, collaboration and communication platforms.

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School communications in the cloud.

Children learn more and have a better quality of school life when everyone in the school community makes a contribution and works in partnership.

In the growing age of digital communication and with the demands of Ofsted to engage whole school communities, it is key that schools use cloud technology to adopt a multi-channel approach to all levels of engagement.

Schools are able to reap significant benefits from adopting transparent, seamless and coherent communication approaches with key stakeholders, particularly parents. Being able to clearly impart key messages to parents in a timely manner can prevent misunderstanding, promote empathy and ensure that everyone is being reached and remains connected. From immediate stakeholders (parents and staff) to people with less direct but no less important links to schools, such as prospective parents, potential hires, and the wider community. In this way, it's imperative that every school implements best-in-class, feature-rich cloud communications systems.

Cloud telephony systems can handle thousands of queries simultaneously. The IVR or voice navigation features built into cloud telephony makes it easy for the caller to understand menu options. Replacing traditional communications technology with cloud-based tools provides schools with call automation and call routing so calls can be automatically directed to the relevant department. Furthermore, advances in technology make it possible for these calls to be answered on any device.

Putting the basics in place by investing in better communication tools will drive higher levels of engagement, cohesion and transparency in schools – and innovating common systems and processes should start with cloud communications platforms to make teachers' and parents' lives easier.

Cloudya on collaboration.
Partnerships between parents, educators and children enhance our pupils' success.

NFON have been providing freedom in cloud communications to the education sector for over 10 years. During this time, they have developed a deep understanding of the best systems and tools to benefit staff, pupils and their parents.

NFON also know in which areas current infrastructures in academic spaces are lacking and have designed and developed specific tools to provide better opportunities for greater flexibility, accessibility and collaboration.

Designed to rival face-to-face communications, NFON's cloud communications tools can be effortlessly applied to any academic setting, budget or requirement.

Cloudya, NFON's sophisticated cloud communications tool, has changed the face of traditional communication systems and supports Government's smarter working initiatives. Cloudya enables all schools to remain connected, collaborative and resilient.

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Cloudya at a glance.

1. Cloudya can be accessed and thus the user reached on any internet enabled device via the app suite

2. Offers complete flexibility with your set up – configure your work environment anywhere with ease and simplicity, no matter where you work.

3. Gives complete control over call handling. Decide which calls to answer, divert to voicemail or even transfer calls to your mobile for on-the-go usage. This enables staff to be more flexible in how they work, but also gives students a smoother experience when trying to contact the institution.

4. Automatically updates and fixes bugs. No more time wasted downloading software - Cloudya comes maintenance free, with no additional cost to upgrade.

5. A whole host of call management features at your fingertips, including call queueing, voice features and virtual fax machines to ensure a seamless user experience.

6. Utilise virtual conference rooms, screen-sharing options and call functions, all from one unique web interface.

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Cloudya offers schools powerful communication features in the familiar Teams environment allowing staff, governors, stakeholders and parents to easily connect with each other and work together on joint projects — whether from the office, at home or on the move.

The importance of integration in education.

True digital transformation must have the capability to connect applications, people and data and integration has become a top priority in education. The ability to integrate and provide rich and seamless experiences across multiple channels and devices, irrespective of location, will ultimately influence every school's viability and success.

One of the most powerful and successful platforms used in schools is Microsoft Teams; it is all-encompassing, providing schools with a digital hub that enables conversations, content, assignments, file sharing and apps together in one place, giving teachers a dynamic and user-friendly learning environment. Microsoft Teams has helped classrooms become collaborative and it can support school staff to become connected via many channels - and all from a single application.

Implementing cloud communications need not be burdensome or time-consuming, and schools are best placed to choose a vendor whose tools seamlessly integrate with Microsoft Teams to ensure continuity of processes, operations and learning.

NFON Integration
for Microsoft Teams*
at a glance.

NFON Integration for Microsoft Teams* also brings all the existing benefits of Microsoft Teams, but with an important distinction: it hosts advanced features to elevate the user experience. The software is designed to give schools added cost efficiencies, increased productivity and ease of use, working seamlessly with Cloudya.

1. Microsoft Teams doesn't have telephony built in with quality voice functionality. NFON Integration for Microsoft Teams* makes up for this, hosting intelligent telephony features at its core. When integrated, the suites provide a powerful unified communications experience.

2. Supports all members of schools to communicate more efficiently and productively on their preferred devices, regardless of location.

3. Offers a subscription-based service to bring greater cost efficiencies and reduce admin costs. Institutions pay only for what they need, with flexible scalability to adapt to busier periods in the academic year.

4. If Microsoft Teams is having issues, it automatically transfers over to Cloudya. This maximises current resources, ensures business continuity and makes for a smoother calling experience for students and staff without delays.

5. Champion a hybrid environment – whether staff prefer to work through Cloudya or Microsoft Teams, our cloud systems mean they can adapt and switch depending on their preference. This is what Smarter Working is all about.

6. Simply integrates within the Microsoft Teams interface, with no additional hardware needed. No need to pay for hardware or phone line costs.

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Why choose NFON?

NFON seek the same goals as our customers in ensuring a fit for purpose solution, built upon tier-one infrastructure and supported by first class support.

Successful communication between school stakeholders is imperative. NFON bring a wealth of experience in how to fully harness the tools of VOIP telephony solution.

NFON's award-winning technology and communications systems are available to the UK public sector on the Government's digital marketplace.

Cloudya and NFON Integration for Microsoft Teams* support the UK's diverse range of schools and stimulates a culture of openness and trust across a valued workforce, driving parental engagement and positive school outcomes. When the whole school community is actively involved in the school's success, meaningful connections will translate into academic progress and move the sector closer to its goal of providing educational excellence – everywhere.

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*Microsoft Teams is a trademark of the Microsoft group of companies

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