

Unified Communications helps University recruitment

Unified Communications & Collaboration



BT's solution delivers lower costs, more efficient call handling and flexible working.

SOAS University of London is the world's leading institution for the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. With around 850 staff and 5,500 students - SOAS uniquely combines language, scholarships, disciplinary expertise and regional focus.

The challenge

SOAS had an ageing telephony system that was coming to the end of its life. Maintenance had become difficult and running costs were going through the roof.

There was very limited disaster recovery capability and basic administration functions such as staff moves and office changes were always a problem. There was no scope for future expansion into unified communications and the increasing need for flexible working and hot desking couldn't be accommodated.

The University Executive Board decided the time had come to re-invest in a new communications solution. Key to the new requirement was future proofing. It was crucial that the new solution wouldn't quickly become obsolete and it would need to provide a platform for the expansion of new unified communication applications. Furthermore the new system needed to be flexible given the University's future plans to close down one campus location and expand their presence at the main campus in Russell Square.

SOAS knew that the funding burden on students was creating a very competitive environment amongst universities to attract the best students. To keep student numbers at an optimum SOAS would have to deal more effectively with large volumes of student enquiries from the Clearing system. With the current set up, they were unable to deal with Clearing calls professionally and potential students were being lost.

Findings from staff research showed that over 50% of employees regularly worked away from the University without any recognised solution in place to enable this.

Market research and site visits to potential partners were undertaken - followed by an ITT process, after which SOAS asked BT to help them develop a UC platform for the future.

Solution & results

BT provided a Cisco® Unified Communications and Contact Centre solution with voicemail, unified messaging and video conferencing. The solution covered around six buildings across two campus locations.

Phase one of the new solution enabled SOAS to create a 'mini' contact centre capability with 30 people answering calls on the first day of Clearing. The system professionally queued callers and played music and messages to potential students in the call queue. On the first day of Clearing the team handled 2,000 calls, a 10 fold increase in the number they'd previously been able to take - enabling SOAS to recruit their target number of new students.

“ The new system has reduced our annual maintenance costs by 75%.

Martin Whiteside,
Assistant director of IT Services, SOAS

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“ We now have a real partnership way of working with BT and our UC solution will enable us to introduce new services ensuring we offer staff and students the very best communications available. ”

Martin Whiteside,
Assistant director of IT Services, SOAS

Recruitment Targets Hit

Says Martin Whiteside, assistant director of IT Services at SOAS: “I was delighted at how quickly and efficiently the new system was implemented, which included the replacement of every phone and voicemail in six buildings, across two campuses in just eight weeks.

“Even though we didn’t deploy full ‘Contact Centre’ capability in the first phase of the project, the system was so adaptable that we were able to set up a call handling capability for Clearing. We were absolutely delighted with the results from Clearing this year and the next stage is to implement ‘Contact Centre’ capability so we can improve our service to potential students and have detailed management information to show how we performed.”

Staff can now ‘hot desk’ across the two campuses and six buildings – and the built in staff directory on the devices along with WebEx collaboration capability has been a real hit.

Every phone now has built in video capability – enhancing internal staff communication, whilst the existing video conferencing equipment has been connected to the new system enabling SOAS to meet and interview overseas staff and students without the need for either party to travel.

Staff Energised & Costs Reduced

Says Martin, “It’s always been difficult to find a free meeting room – so now if five people need to get together they simply set up a WebEx and log in wherever they are. It’s quicker and more efficient, saving valuable staff time.

“Additionally the new system has lowered our annual maintenance costs by 75%, overseas travel spend has been reduced and with just one network to run for all data and voice services – the return on investment has been excellent.”

How BT helped

BT worked closely with the University team when the installation started in mid-June. The project was completed in mid-August, two weeks before Clearing, giving time to test and prepare the system for the expected influx of calls.

The University found that having the same dedicated BT person on site leading the project was of real benefit. Says Martin, “We had the same guy on site continually which gave us a consistent experience which we liked. The team got to know him and the relationship continues to this day. We also liked the fact that BT had wider resources to call upon if for any reason we had needed extra help at any time.”

The future

The second phase of the project will give SOAS full Contact Centre functionality including web chat – to reduce the burden on telephony during Clearing. SOAS can now support flexible working and they plan to introduce Jabber to enable speedy internal communication and faster decision making. Flexible working will be expanded so that staff will be able to work both from home and at hot desks across the estate. The system will deliver the same worker experience at home as on site and the use of presence and video will be expanded. Says Martin: “We plan to increase the use of business video – as we’ll interview new staff this way, whereas previously there was a cost for flights to the UK for a two hour meeting. This will deliver significant cost benefits to the University.”

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