

GETTING YOUR DIGITAL STRATEGY RIGHT

Published by Sec-Ed

To get the most out of Bett, you should be clear about what your school's digital strategy looks like above all else. [Al Kingsley](#) explains why and how...

If there is one piece of advice I can offer educators attending this year's Bett, it would be to go armed with a very clear strategy. I am not talking about a list of talks to attend or stands to visit, but rather the need for a clear digital strategy for your school.

It is easy to get dazzled by technology at Bett; the latest technological innovations can set the most steadfast pulses racing. However, a piecemeal approach based on ad hoc purchases is unlikely to deliver on the results that were promised.

Any ed-tech decision needs to be considered within a much wider context. What will be the impact on infrastructure, support services or teacher training? How often should it be refreshed, and how can you measure its effectiveness?

Investing in ed-tech without a defined digital strategy is rather like relying on your sat-nav for directions without first entering the destination. You can keep on driving, but you are unlikely to end up at the right location.

Whose responsibility?

Your digital strategy will always have the enhancement of teaching and learning at its heart and will consider how technology can support teachers. However, creating a strategy that is right for a school involves engagement and insight from staff across the organisation. This includes:

- IT: To identify what is needed in terms of infrastructure, delivery of technology, maintenance and support, and training. Also closely involved in data protection and security considerations.
- Governing body or trustees: Oversees and monitors any proposed expenditure and

ensures the school can measure the impact.

- Senior leadership team: Ensures the strategy aligns with wider objectives while also being a champion for its development and implementation.
- SEND: Considers and advises whether the digital strategy is broad enough to support the various types of learners who have special needs.
- Safeguarding/designated safeguarding lead: Ensures investment in new technology does not affect the school's ability to meet its obligations in terms of keeping children safe while using it.
- Finance: Advises on the cost and resourcing implications of the digital strategy. Ideally, should help to facilitate an effective digital strategy, rather than limit it to simply "we have X budget".

Although it is tempting to identify just one individual to drive forward a school's strategy, it is wise to bring together a team. Each stakeholder has a range of considerations and questions that are important to their priorities. Combined, these help a school understand what is needed and to measure the impact of their long-term goal.



What are we trying to achieve?

What you want your digital strategy to achieve will be specific to your school. You may have one very clear goal in mind, or a combination of several.

A 2015 survey in conjunction with the ISC Digital Strategy Group found that the key goals schools were aiming to achieve via ed-tech included:

- Enhancing learning outcomes.
- Increasing staff, student and parent engagement.
- Implementing collaborative technologies.
- Promoting digital wellbeing.
- Implementing unified and integrated technologies.
- A technology refresh.
- Increasing attainment.
- Implementing a data security policy that delivers legal and operational requirements.
- Achieving better value for money.

Once you have a clear sense of what you want to achieve, the next step is to create an action plan. This helps to break down top level goals into more manageable chunks of activity. It also gives everyone involved a clearer sense of priorities and timeline. It is worth remembering that a digital strategy is often a long-term plan, covering three to five years. Incremental progress is as much a success as a large-scale implementation.

Factors for success

The leadership team's role in an effective ed-tech strategy should not be underestimated. The biggest single barrier to successful implementation will be lack of buy-in from senior staff.

They may worry about time allocated to execute it, the budget constraints or other hurdles along the way. This fear can partially be overcome by clear co-production of the strategy and clear communication and vision championed by leaders. In producing a communicable strategy it is best to:

- Keep it simple: Overly complicated strategies offer less flexibility and are more likely to disenfranchise the school community.
- Understand where you are: Be clear on your current position, understand what does, and does not, work well.
- Be clear on the value of current technology: A good question to ask is, would anyone notice if it was gone?
- Have a good hold on budget: Understand how the digital strategy can be financed. This can often require a longer term view, and an acceptance that some aspects of a plan may not be able to happen until further funding has been identified.
- Keep communicating: Keep everyone up to date with developments and progress, listen and act on concerns, and encourage a culture of co-production and everyone working together.
- Get the support of other schools: Visit schools and talk to staff who have already implemented a digital strategy to get their advice.
- Existing technology: Build your strategy around ensuring your existing technology will continue to add value.

Infrastructure: The essential foundations

Infrastructure can seem like a bit of a techie word, but it is simply thinking about how ed-tech will be managed and how it fits with the rest of a

school's technology.

When schools take a piecemeal approach to ed-tech, there is much more risk that how it all fits with other technology and the IT management and infrastructure requirements will be forgotten. As Karl Denton, IT Manager at St Bede CE Primary Multi-Academy Trust, explained: "From a network manager's point of view, it's important that the school has a digital strategy so that the senior management team and the technical staff are working together."

"There is no point in teachers/management wanting to introduce a technology if, from a technical point of view, it isn't possible. If the digital strategy aims to implement a technology in three years' time, then network managers can ensure the network is ready for it."

For every device added or application deployed, consideration needs to be given to how that device will be managed and maintained, who will have responsibility, and what additional demands it will place on the existing school infrastructure. For instance, if a school invests in a set of tablets for a class but overlooks wi-fi access points, implementation will be delayed and unpredicted costs will increase.

Here are the key questions you should consider as part of your digital strategy plan:

- Who is responsible for managing and maintaining the new technology?
- What connectivity or services are required to operate the new technology?
- How is the device to be managed to ensure its use is controlled and appropriate?
- What is the expected "useful life" of the new technology? When will it need to be updated and/or replaced?
- Is it compatible with the existing technology in the school?

First steps towards strategic success

Devising and implementing a digital strategy can seem like a daunting task. It certainly requires concerted effort. However, once the first steps are taken, the dividends become obvious. A school's digital strategy is a long-term journey with multiple milestones along the way. Take heart in the fact that you are not alone on this journey. There are experts, school leaders and technologists offering advice and support.

Planning for a visit to Bett is always a good idea – the show is vast. However, even more important is understanding why you are going and what you want to discover. A digital strategy answers this and ensures you can make the very best of your visit.



Al Kingsley is Managing Director of NetSupport. Visit him at Bett on Stand NL44 to ask any questions and to share your experiences.

Further information & resources

With ICT Evangelist, Mark Anderson, a former school leader and advocate for the purposeful use of technology linked to pedagogy, NetSupport has launched *A guide to creating a digital strategy in education*, a free resource to help schools ensure their use of technology is as effective as possible in supporting teaching and learning.

Visit www.netsupportsoftware.com/digital-strategy