

Peter Symonds College in UK savors success thanks in part to IMail Server

Peter Symonds College in Winchester is the largest sixth form college in the country and has been flying high in the government league tables since its inception – ranking an impressive third in the A level results league for the south of England in 1999. This success is attributed, in part, to the pioneering approach taken towards IT in education and, as Charles Parish, director of IT at Peter Symonds' College explained, Ipswitch's award winning e-mail server IMail has played a central role in the college's success.

"Providing more than 2,000 full-time students and 140 teachers with effective and reliable computer and Internet access was a major challenge for the IT team," explained Parish who is a full time IT appointment, demonstrating the college's commitment and belief to the role of IT in education. "One key challenge was the roll out of full e-mail access to the staff and a test group of students, a role that has been ably filled by Ipswitch's IMail Server."

Parish realized that due to the size of the college, and the fact that it is spread across different buildings (with the adult education office being one mile away) the communication channels between teachers themselves and with their students could be improved by using IT services and specifically e-mail. Charles' requirements were very exact when it came to choosing a new e-mail server; the system needed to be easy to use and administer – due to the annual turnover of more than 1,000 students it would have to cope with many users being added and removed. "We looked at various NT options, which were either too expensive or the support wasn't acceptable. IMail had the best features and support arrangements of them all," said Parish.

"We especially liked the fact that we could extract information from the MIS student database and save it in a format that we can rapidly import into IMail – the ability to link to Access databases and batch input users was very important in making our decision."

Parish was also impressed with IMail's Web messaging capabilities. "All users have to do is enter the college e-mail URL in a Web browser, submit their user ID and password and they can access their e-mail," he explained. "They don't need a dedicated desktop unit – which is a logistical nightmare for educational establishments – and they can have access to their e-mail folders, saved drafts etc. at home."

IMail's list server is another function that is being used by the college as a part of a trial to see if they can improve communication between teachers and class members. "Our tutors can now send out lesson hand-outs, homework, and support materials via easy to create and administer discussion lists and we expect to see savings on paper costs and



time spent photocopying and binding etc. This also means students can have better contact with their tutors as they are now only a mouse click away.”

Many schools and colleges across the country do not have a dedicated IT department – quite often the “IT manager” is a teacher – and there is a real need for software packages that are both easy to install, administer, and use. Although Parish’s is a full time IT appointment with a team of three support staff, the need for a simple yet effective e-mail solution was the same. Observed Parish, “With 2,000 students at Peter Symonds College, the IT requirements can be quite demanding. Our e-mail server had to be easy to use and reliable while not compromising on functionality and expandability. Since installing IMail last March we haven’t had any problems. In fact, it’s made my job a lot easier!”

Charles’ team subscribes to the IMail user forum, a meeting place for worldwide users. “The forum is an excellent source of information, as well as being a true user community. In fact, it is through conversations on this independent forum that I recently decided to upgrade to version 6.0 of IMail. This was a very easy process and took only 15 minutes!

“All in all, IMail Server is an easy to use, powerful system that is used by virtually all of the teaching and administration staff. It is a very reliable and stable package, which runs transparently across the college. Peter Symonds College is considered to be one of the best sixth form colleges in the country, and packages such as IMail are helping us to further increase our teaching capabilities and offer our students the best in further education.”

This article appeared in *IT Week* and *Education Today*.
