Keeping IT local

Who says tailor-made is a thing of the past? At Astec Solutions, the approach is to start with the nursery team's needs and design technology round them. Sue Churchill finds out more.

How many so-called technological advances fail because they don't meet users' needs? Think of Google Plus (or rather, don't think of it). Designed to rival Facebook, it sank without trace as it simply couldn't hack it (excuse the pun). So, when Tariq Ayuub started up his own nursery, Rainbow Smiles, he was very well placed to know what programme would or wouldn't work for his new nursery.

What he wanted was one piece of software to bring everything together, saving him and his team time so they could focus on the business of caring for and developing the children in their care. It not only had to fulfill all the back-office functions, but also support room leaders and practitioners, ideally reducing their paperwork. He scouted around, and, eventually, drawing on his skills as an IT consultant, decided that a tailor-made programme was the only way forward.

Avoiding interruptions

And why not? He was able to test out his software, Prism Touch Screen Solution, in the nursery, modifying it to ensure administrators and practitioners could easily enter and access information. So, on went all the information on families, including medical records with updates on such things as allergies and current medication. This is standard, of course, but what Tariq's team were saying was that they constantly had to interrupt themselves in the room to check paper records – or hold it in their heads.

Meanwhile, management took the opposite line: that they needed to know what was going on in the rooms – now. A communication issue for all, clearly, where the constant factor was how to save precious time while maintaining accuracy.

So, what Tariq developed over the months was a touch screen in each room. Everything the back office entered on to the records was there instantly for practitioners to view. Result: the practitioners felt more in control and more relaxed, as already this was proving its worth.

Not easy

Over the months, he worked on further features: a daily diary that keyworkers could complete actually in the room, a way of recording landmarks. One of the biggest challenges was how to speed up the task of tracing each child's development path. Not easy. Each modification was introduced to the team, and, if it met with blank looks despite training, it would be back to the technological drawing board.

By working alongside practitioners, discussing with them what their issues were, and then devising technological solutions to address them, he introduced new features, gradually modifying them to suit his team. The touch screens have now been in the nursery for over six months. And the result of this side-by-side development of the software is two-fold: less paperwork and more in-depth record-keeping.

Feel the benefits

His keyworkers estimate that the touch-screen feature has reduced paperwork from 40 minutes a day to intermittent updating sessions of just a minute or two each. As a result, they have time to focus more on what parents want to hear, and, for example, can now send parents not just the menu for the day, but a list of ingredients.

One-to-one support all round. It can't get much better than that. But, in fact, it can, for one of the spin-offs of this extra attention to his staff's development and needs is that, not only is their time management better, but interest in training is at an all time high: Rainbow Smile has one graduate, two EYPs and two doing Foundation degrees. ■

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- Modern technology plays a vital role in the successful operation of every organisation. With technology developing at a rapid pace, choosing the right cost-effective solution can be a difficult exercise, and many organisations do not utilise their existing infrastructure for the maximum benefit.

  Astec Solutions will be writing a regular column within NMT , where they will be looking to provide free and independent advice on your IT issues, helping you to navigate through the IT minefield.

  If you have any IT related questions please email caroline@hawkerpublications.com