



Networks First / Swiftpath Case Study

Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust (MEHT)

Networks First is a partner focused support services organisation with multi vendor and mixed technology capabilities whose specialist partner in the healthcare sector is Swiftpath Business Solutions. Together they provide network support to Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust. This is an overview of their role in the ongoing design and implementation of a resilient and reliable network that is now 'fit for purpose' in providing IT to support clinical excellence and enhance the patient's experience of the trust.

Networks First and Swiftpath help MEHT build a network fit for the future

For Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust (MEHT), a consistent and reliable network service is vital to support medical staff, clinicians and administrators - and to provide critical services in a 24 x 7 environment. Supported by its partner Swiftpath, Networks First helped the Trust carry out an extensive and much needed network upgrade following years of insufficient investment.

Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust provides acute hospital-based services to more than 350,000 people living in and around the towns of Chelmsford, Maldon and Witham. With an annual turnover of £190m and employing over 3,000 staff at two hospital sites in Chelmsford and four others in the mid Essex area, MEHT's aim is to achieve Foundation Trust status during 2009. Director of IT, Mike Casey, joined the Trust in a turnaround capacity in January 2007, after completing a similar trouble-shooting role at Homerton University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust.

THE CHALLENGE

Mike Casey's principal task upon taking up the role to head up a turnaround team was to review the operational stability of the organisation in IT terms, which he refers to as a "drains up and audit exercise".

In previous years, an NHS shared service organisation had been established to provide centralised IT services to NHS organisations in Essex. Within MEHT, these services were supplemented locally by specialist networking services from Networks First. Due to an inherent lack of overall management and accountability, the network service had become inconsistent and was performing poorly.

Mike Casey recognised that the Trust could not continue to be supported in this way and put in place a plan for a solid infrastructure, backed by appropriate, professional support. This was to be the basis of his long-term strategy for developing and implementing the IT infrastructure MEHT requires for its future success.

"Starting at the core of our IT infrastructure, the server room, and working outwards, our team began by engaging with the clinical staff and, based on this information, carried out an assessment of the operational resilience and stability of the Trust's IT infrastructure. From this, a plan was prepared to address the issues in stages over the following three, six and twelve months – supported by a road-map for achieving our vision."

There were many issues to be addressed, and Mike Casey introduced a Rapid Deployment Strategy based on Gartner's Infrastructure Maturity Model. The aim was to reduce infrastructure costs, increase flexibility to adopt new technology and improve service levels.

"The Trust's executive board members acknowledged immediately what needed to be done," says Mike Casey. "The Trust is where it is today is because the board had the confidence to make those early decisions and a determination to succeed".

What the IM&T Department required from the start to achieve this major upgrade was a strong, determined and co-operative effort that demanded total commitment from his infrastructure support partners. Network First proved time and again that they were the right Network Solutions supplier for Mid Essex NHS Trust.

THE SOLUTION

Having been given the green light by the Trust's executive board, Mike Casey and his team embarked on a series of strategic clinical projects, each designed to deliver major long-term benefits to the organisation.

"When embarking on a major restructure of this kind, with many fast moving projects, you have to have a strong sense of timing. Like a ballistics exercise – you have several very large projects running in

parallel which are going to land at pre-determined stages during the year. It is therefore essential to meet each go-live date along the way in order to maintain impetus and confidence in the programme.

“To ensure this approach was successful, we had field support to provide all the things we needed in place to enable those IT projects when they landed – starting with three months of very intense work by ourselves, Networks First and Swiftpath to prepare the site to receive the new clinical systems.

“In addition, we examined the capabilities and capacity we had at our disposal within our organisation to deploy all these projects. Those we lacked internally, we needed to find externally. We had a very strong network upgrade requirement and lacked the skills internally to deliver this to the trust.

“When I arrived, the Trust was supported by two organisations, Networks First and the NHS shared services organisation. Neighbouring trusts also used the shared service as their network support agents, which meant we were effectively part of a ‘club’, where every member organisation needed to agree any programme of work before it was carried out.

“This may work where you have a very stable environment. But as soon as one member trust decides that changes are required to improve performance, then the shared service model loses its effect. I treated them as an external supplier, and took the view initially that if they were delivering against our SLA requirement and providing good business continuity, then I would continue to use them.”

After an 9 months review of the situation, however, Mike Casey decided not to continue with support from the shared service and instead to give responsibility to Networks First and Swiftpath. He says he is still very happy he made that decision.

BENEFITS

“For continuity, I needed suppliers like Networks First with Swiftpath as their specialist partner. They are experienced in NHS IT and understand the demands of the clinical environment in which we work. They understand the market and the needs of the Trust, so I don’t have to waste time explaining what I need every time I have a requirement from them.”

“This is important because a feature of a rapid deployment model is that you don’t have the luxury of time. Consequently, when you get your resources aligned, you have to rely on them. You look at the supplier and decide if they are capable of delivering what you need to get through the tsunami of work heading your way. You need to be sure you can rely on them at the times you really need them to - and be confident they will be capable of delivering for you.”

Mike Casey says any trust undergoing a rapid turnaround demands a huge amount of operational activity to maintain services. “First off, you have to put out a lot of fires and keep putting them out; at the same time you have to put in place the infrastructure to ensure you don’t have as many in future. While keeping the business moving forwards, you have to maintain the longer term view. What you’re looking for ultimately is resilience and stability, without any drama.

“I can say that the Swiftpath and Networks First partnership did the job we needed and delivered the required services. I was happy to sign the contract to renew their services. From a networking perspective, we simply wanted the system to work properly. With good suppliers such as these, you can go to the project board with assurance that you have the back-up you need to get the job done. This enables you to get actions closed off in a two-weekly cycle and keep the momentum going on big projects. Reliance on a good supplier is therefore a key factor to success.”

Mike Casey says that making major infrastructure changes to a network in a clinical environment is like choreography. “When you embark on the process of changing your network environment, you effectively slide new technology underneath the existing architecture that’s running live clinical systems. Where you’re trying to do something with a critical service like A&E, you have a very short timescale to deliver an incredible amount of work.

“In these situations you need a supplier who can work well when they’re up against it – as I said earlier you don’t need drama. I walk through these clinics every day, so I’m very aware of the importance of clinical systems in the smooth running of our hospitals.

“Our objective is for patients to be treated and leave the hospital as soon as they can, having had a good experience. The patient flow in our organisation is huge, so to maintain and improve this while maintaining services, we need a very capable network support provider who can deliver in sometimes difficult circumstances and under extreme stress”.

“We built a network environment based on a high performance and resilient core, one that is self-repairing, because we have carefully avoided single points of failure. It means we now have a much more stable IT environment. Moreover, thanks to built-in redundancy and resilience, the hospital can now function in the event that any local faults develop”.

FUTURE

“Looking to the future, and from a supplier selection perspective, you not only need an organisation whose people are capable of rolling up their sleeves to fix things when necessary, but one who can also tap in quickly to new technology, organisational strategy and the local architecture – in other words, thought-leadership. Networks First and Swiftpath are good at this.”

What’s more, Mike Casey says their ability to bring in the right people is excellent. “Getting the top people involved - and having high level conversations with them about your maturity model - means they understand where you’re going and can therefore engage good people downstream to get the job done. Technical architecture plans require totally different thought processes to simple network maintenance – you not only have a two-year plan, but you also need to keep in mind what’s ahead of you for the next two months. You need to have a network architecture discussion going on all the time.”

Now that the IM&T Team are on top of the network infrastructure issues, they are keen to link in with the maturity model Microsoft and Connecting for Health are proposing for trusts. Having reached Level 3, his plan is to be a Level 4 trust by 31 March, 2010. “It means we’ll be maintaining our progress and we will need good people to help us do it.

“The maturity model is a great way for executive boards to understand where their trusts are. It allows you to portray progress on a roadmap. We’re currently re-engineering our existing network environment with Wi-Fi capability to support site-wide RFID. This will enable us to track critical assets around the hospital and support an effective infection control strategy.

“We’re also connecting a new PFI build – a five-storey hospital due to be commissioned in August 2010. Eight weeks before the opening, we’ll have had networking and telecom people fully engaged with the PFI Team to make sure that the new infrastructure can deliver all expectations.

“We intend to build on what we have done with our rapid deployment model by integrating our core IT infrastructure and deploying clinical systems on top of that. We are developing a number of applications around patient management – enabling mobile clinicians, for example, to log in from home using Web tools to access medical information for patients from wherever they happen to be.

“Our ultimate aim is make the trust truly connected - with a really modern environment, seamless connectivity within and between our hospital sites and the ability to access a full suite of patient information wherever staff are.

“Networks First and Swiftpath have more than fulfilled their role in providing a consistent and reliable source of network technical expertise and support, while delivering the necessary network infrastructure to support the upgrade projects on time and on budget.

“There have obviously been challenges at times – so their ability to provide a fast and flexible turn-around to requests for assistance has been very important. Networks First and Swiftpath are now well established locally – they have a track record of success and present the least risk option in these uncertain times. At the end of the day, with them I know I can now rely on a solid, no-nonsense business relationship.

ENDS.