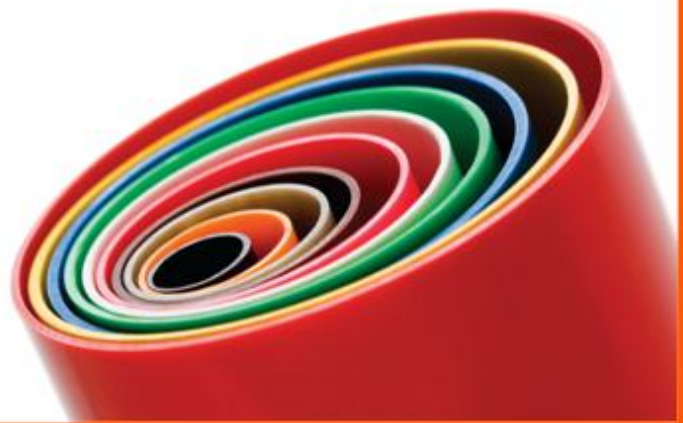


Case Study

Citizen Schools increases collaboration and cuts costs



Nonprofit organization fosters teaching innovation with newly-released collaboration solution

Business Situation

The story of Citizen Schools began in Boston, Massachusetts, where two social entrepreneurs, Eric Schwarz and Ned Rimer, decided to do something about the escalation of youth crime in low-income neighborhoods. They wanted to turn the long, empty hours of out-of-school time into a positive opportunity for young people, so they volunteered to teach 20 fifth-grade students at Dorchester's Paul A. Dever school. As a former reporter, Schwarz taught an apprenticeship in journalism. Drawing on his years running the emergency medical team at the University of Vermont, Rimer taught first aid. Neither predicted the spectacular response of the children involved. In 1995, they registered Citizen Schools as a nonprofit organization with a goal to build a network of volunteers, called citizen teachers, and staff providing after-school academic support, leadership development, and apprenticeships. Today, Citizen Schools operates in 40 schools in seven states, serving 4,400 students and engaging 3,200 volunteers.

To foster innovation in their after-class programs, the volunteer teachers and staff at Citizen Schools need to share information as they develop best practices. The number of students in Citizen Schools programs is expected to double by 2014, making a collaboration solution key to the organization's future.

However, Citizen Schools faced some challenges in providing an intuitive collaboration solution. It had deployed Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 soon after its release, but staff mainly used the solution as an online repository, which grew to more than 60,000 documents in the span of several years.

"Our intranet was a wilderness dotted with pockets of activity and you could only find something if you stumbled upon it," recalls David Crusoe, Product Manager, Intranet, at Citizen Schools. "We had problems with document duplication and version control, so teachers and staff ended up using email to communicate and share drafts."

Citizen Schools needed a solution that could facilitate the free flow of ideas across its community. "The ability to distribute materials and resources from the head office to our regional staff is a key operational performance indicator," says William Nourse, Chief Technology Officer at Citizen Schools. "It's also important for our front-line staff to provide us with feedback so we can improve the quality of our programs and resources. Our original collaboration platform didn't support communications to and from the field, and we never developed a taxonomy or governance structure to manage how the system should work."

The five-member IT department wanted to give Citizen Schools employees the right tools to work efficiently, recruit and support volunteers, and grow the network of participating schools. "With the release of Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010 in May 2010, it seemed like a good opportunity to offer a brand-new collaboration solution to help build our organization," says Crusoe.

Citizen Schools knew it could be a challenge to find a vendor with demonstrated experience working with such a new product. "Market reputation is a key attribute we look for in a partner," says Nourse. "We wanted the solution in place by July 2010 for our summer institute where we host training sessions for our field staff. That meant we needed a partner who could deliver the solution in just eight weeks."

"Because Avanade reassured us with its expertise on the latest Microsoft collaboration technologies, we felt comfortable going ahead with the deployment of SharePoint Server 2010, which saved us approximately [U.S.]\$50,000 in upgrade costs."
— **William Nourse, Chief Technology Officer, Citizen Schools**

Business Solution

Citizen Schools had been working with technology vendor Accenture to help build a vision and design for its new collaborative infrastructure. During this project, Citizen Schools was introduced to Avanade. "We decided on Avanade for a number of reasons," says Crusoe. "The company was highly recommended by Accenture and Microsoft. We knew Avanade had already taken very large steps with developing on SharePoint Server 2010, even pre-launch, and its consultants were capable of building robust systems in this environment. As one of the first nonprofit organizations deploying SharePoint 2010 technology, Avanade's market-proven experience meant a lot to us."

In mid-May 2010, when the Avanade team met the stakeholders for the SharePoint 2010 project, the IT team's decision was ratified by a very favorable initial impression. "The Avanade team demonstrated immediate strength," says Crusoe. "Everyone took time up-front to understand our business requirements and then very quickly got to work."

During the engagement, the five-member Avanade team communicated effectively with up to 14 individuals at Citizen Schools. "Our management styles are similar and we were comfortable that the project would transition smoothly from the work we did with Accenture. This relationship continuity was very important," says Crusoe. "The Avanade team wasted no time in mapping our business needs to the capabilities of the new SharePoint technology, building a template for the site with the right look and feel and including Web Parts to sift through information and to instantiate workflows."

As with every technology project, there were challenges. For example, an issue developed with an online form that users complete to submit a request for help-desk service. "It was dogged determination from the Avanade team that solved the problem and ensured we met our deadline," says Crusoe. "They literally worked weekends and through holidays to get the job done."

Avanade's close connections with Microsoft provided additional value. Crusoe remembers a time late in the project when he and an Avanade consultant were on the phone with Microsoft Premium Support for several hours troubleshooting an issue with search. "We would never have had this level of access to Microsoft resources without Avanade," he says.

Finishing on time and on budget meant that Citizen Schools was ready to introduce the new collaboration solution to its staff for the 2010 summer institute. The feedback from participants has been uniformly positive. "I had my doubts before I tried it," said Stacy Miles, Chief Program Officer at Citizen Schools. "But when I tried to search for something, there it was!"

Even though the SharePoint 2010 solution has only been in place for five weeks, more than 500 office and field staff visit the portal daily, accumulating more than 2,000 page views. There are now approximately 100 different sub-sites, and the Citizen Schools governance board is actively involved in managing the solution. Training will be ongoing over the summer, with Citizen Schools expecting everyone to be ready to use the solution for the beginning of school in September 2010.

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“Avanade stood out from other vendors in their commitment to get the job done on time and according to our specifications,” says Nourse. “They were thorough, determined, and dedicated—definitely a cut above other vendors.”

Results

At the heart of any educational endeavor is the exchange of information. With SharePoint Server 2010, Citizen Schools has a collaboration platform to support the free flow of ideas among staff at the head office and its field educators, so that everyone can work together more productively to better serve students. Citizen Schools has not only saved money by using the solution, it also plans to utilize it as a valuable asset in building partnerships with outside organizations and donors.

Encourages collaboration to drive innovation

Citizen Schools staff at the head office will use the collaboration solution to more efficiently organize and distribute information to regional and campus staff. With a better taxonomy, staff are finding that documents are now easily discoverable through keyword search. And with the improved content management capabilities of the solution, document duplication and poor versioning are no longer an impediment to effective collaboration.

“We expect huge efficiency gains now that our teachers and staff can easily find the information they need to deliver their programs,” says Crusoe. “The solution is much easier to access and offers user-friendly navigation. Now our school-based staff can access key resources with a higher contextual basis so they can exchange ideas and drive innovation in teaching to better serve our students. If we look at a three-year return on investment, we expect to achieve very high returns.”

Saves costs

Thanks to the expertise in SharePoint Server 2010 that Avanade brought to the table, Citizen Schools was able to avoid the significant costs of upgrading its existing Office SharePoint Server 2007 solution by deploying a brand-new solution that better served its needs.

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Helps showcase achievements, build partnerships

Citizen Schools plans to use its new collaboration solution as an extensible platform to engage campus and regional staff in organizational management, curricular development and fundraising management. “We need to be able to tightly organize what we do at Citizen Schools, and with our cutting-edge solution we have built-in analytic capabilities we can manage to our measurements,” says Crusoe. “This capability will be a key success factor in driving growth and program impact over the next 24 months.”

By partnering with Avanade, Citizen Schools was able to develop and quickly deploy a collaboration solution that supports its national staff in educating children and strengthening communities. “Avanade was a very strong partner for a number of reasons,” concludes Nourse. “They recognized what we were up against trying to deploy brand-new technology in an extremely short time frame, and they went out of their way to ensure it was a success.”

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About Citizen Schools

Founded in 1995 in Boston, Massachusetts, Citizen Schools has a vision to improve the educational trajectories of young people attending grades six through eight in low-income neighbourhoods. Its after-school apprenticeship programs are available in 40 schools across the country. The programs are run with the help of 1,100 volunteers, called citizen teachers, and 450 staff members who provide academic support and leadership development for more than 4,500 students. Citizen Schools programs support classroom learning and equip students with the skills to succeed in high school, college, the workplace, and civic life.

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About Avanade

Avanade provides business technology services that connect insight, innovation and expertise in Microsoft® technologies to help customers realize results. Avanade's services and solutions help improve performance, productivity and sales for organizations in all industries. Additional information can be found at www.avanade.com

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