

University of Oxford Improves Efficiency, Reduces Travel

Customer Case Study



World-leading university supplements face-to-face meetings with WebEx, improving communication among staff and students.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Customer Name: University of Oxford

Industry: Education

Location: Oxford, UK

Number of Employees: 10,000

Number of Students: 20,000

Challenge

- Offer greater choice of communication solutions
- Deploy communication system beneficial for both staff and students
- Make it easier for future students to apply for study

Solution

- Cisco WebEx Meeting Center
- Cisco WebEx Training Center
- Cisco Unified Communications Manager

Results

- Solution being deployed throughout university
- Staff now hold discussions with students via Cisco WebEx, and the software is available for student use
- International applicants now able to conduct interviews via web conferencing

Challenge

The University of Oxford was the first university in the English-speaking world, with a vision to remain at the forefront of centers of learning, teaching, and research. It has a remarkable global appeal, with over a third of the student population coming from more than a 140 countries. The university also has a distinctive college and tutorial system, which underpins a culture of close academic supervision and careful personal support for its students.

The federated nature of the university's colleges means that it is difficult to implement a standardized system, because all the departments and colleges are very independent. There is no centralized method of communicating with all the different groups. Students, in particular, used a mixture of free online chat and calling software to contact staff or other students and avoid travelling. Aside from these tools, students and staff had to travel to meet (and this travel could be local or international), use the telephone, or call on an Internet voice over IP (VoIP) service.

The university wanted to offer members a more advanced collaborative solution and to provide an efficient means for students to work together across the campus. With students living as far away as five miles from departmental staff or colleagues, some had to travel for over an hour to attend a ten-minute discussion with a colleague or tutor.

In some cases, prospective international students found the application process prohibitive because attending the necessary interviews face-to-face required a lengthy visa application process and a huge expense in travel.



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Jemima Spare,
IT Support Officer for Telecoms,
University of Oxford



“As the university is so spread out, with some students needing a 45-minute bus journey for a ten-minute conversation, I am keen to offer them the chance to attend online. WebEx is ideal for this in so many ways, as students can attend, share, and interact with us from across the city.”

David Baker,
Senior Teaching and Learning Technologist,
Learning Technologies Group,
University of Oxford

Solution

The University of Oxford wanted to use Cisco WebEx® because of its good experience with Cisco® Unified Communications Manager and Cisco routers and switches. “We spoke with Cisco and found that WebEx could help us improve our internal communications,” says Jemima Spare, IT support officer for telecoms at the university. “We initially trialed the software for about six months, and it went very well. We found that it provided a solid alternative to the communication tools previously in use, and people began using it a lot.

“The federated system here means that roll-out has been consisting mostly of word-of-mouth recommendation, but we are seeing more and more departments adopt the technology,” says Spare. “We have seen particularly strong adoption in the science departments.”

The University of Oxford also took advantage of the technology when an ash cloud from an Icelandic volcano closed European airspace for several days. “People don’t necessarily realize they need these sorts of tool until they’ve used it,” says Spare. “We suggested to our existing staff: ‘Here is the solution, let’s use it,’ and uptake began to rise.”

Results

“Be it the ash cloud or, other climactic disruption like snow, WebEx has helped us and our partners keep going as usual,” says Spare. “In exceptional cases, where prospective students encounter visa requirements and are just coming for an interview, we are working with the British Council to set up equipment and run interviews over WebEx.”

“We’re also seeing improvements in operational efficiency, particularly in the Business Services and Projects department, who use it to provide remote support to their students,” says Spare. “It’s much more collaborative. We’re actually using the technology to train people how to use WebEx online, which is in turn increasing the level of adoption.”

Spare adds: “As WebEx is a software as a service (SaaS) solution, it benefits us because we don’t have to run our own hardware and support for the solution. It can be implemented inside the organization without expensive capital expenditure. That means we can start with a small roll-out, then expand to an enterprise solution as we grow in line with demand, without paying large sums for the infrastructure.”

David Baker, senior teaching and learning technologist at the Learning Technologies Group at Oxford, found that the software was a great way to learn at a desk. “It’s been extremely useful for some colleagues of mine, one of whom regularly works at home and another who was on maternity leave. I do think they are quite appreciative of the technology and that they don’t have to travel in for ad-hoc meetings.”





Next Steps

"I'm currently pushing an idea with my colleagues called Virtual Computer 8," says Baker. "We offer students who come along to our courses a drop-in session, where they can get post-course support and ask for advice in applying their new skills to their work and research. As the university is so spread out, with some students needing a 45-minute bus journey for a ten-minute conversation, I am keen to offer them the chance to attend online. WebEx is ideal for this in so many ways, as students can attend, share, and interact with us from across the city. If they visit our offices, they might not have all their relevant files or other work with them; with WebEx, we can see what they are working on and access their computer remotely to help with any issues with the computing programming."

For More Information

To find out more about Cisco WebEx, go to: www.cisco.com/go/webex

To read other success stories, go to: www.cisco.com/go/webexcasestudies

To provide feedback or participate in the WebEx customer reference program, email: real.results@webex.com

Product List

- Cisco WebEx Meeting Center
- Cisco WebEx Training Center
- Cisco Unified Communications Manager



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