



**aptem.**

Intelligent technology®

**‘What works’ for  
IT transformation  
in FE colleges:  
organisation, culture  
and integration**

## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Executive summary  | 4  |
| Our experts  | 8  |
| 1. Introduction  | 9  |
| 2. IT transformation projects<br>in colleges – pinch points    | 12 |
| 3. ‘What works’ in college-based<br>IT transformation projects | 22 |
| 4. Conclusion  | 32 |



'What works' for IT transformation in FE colleges: organisation, culture and integration

**It is estimated that 70% of IT transformation projects fail. As more colleges turn to digital solutions to manage remote-learning options, business performance and Ofsted compliance, it is critical to achieve a higher success rate – not least because resources in the FE sector are scarce.**

At Aptem, we have extensive experience of implementing digital transformation projects across the FE, university and independent learning provider apprenticeship and skills sectors. We work with sector experts in colleges to implement Aptem. Who better to try to bring together critical learning points about how to get it right?

In this white paper, we interviewed 'on the ground' IT implementation personnel who work in the college environment and in our company. The aim was to explore the reasons why digital transformation projects fail, and to share what good practices colleges could deploy to ensure the success of new systems.



## Executive summary

**The aim of this white paper is to bring together an analysis of why IT transformation projects don't work as well as they should in colleges, and to share good practice to ensure success.**

We define IT or digital transformation as:

*"...a series of deep and coordinated workforce, culture, and technology shifts that enable new educational and operating models, and transform an institution's operations, strategic directions, and value proposition" (Source: EDUCAUSE).*

This perspective establishes that IT transformation is more than simply introducing a new platform. It intimately involves the college culture and operations, staff capabilities and pedagogy – the way teaching can be understood and delivered. IT transformation projects are strategic, not simply technical.

We spoke to four 'on the ground' IT professionals with substantial experience of college IT environments to comment on common problems and solutions. We summarise here what they found.

### **IT transformation projects in colleges: pinch points**

#### **Organisational culture:**

- There were fears among staff that new IT or digital systems could replace them.
- Staff often found it easier to stick with what they already knew.
- IT may not be top of the list of college priorities, as they are largely focused on the student.
- There may be silo working, where there is confusion about who is choosing, leading and involved in the IT project versus who will be using it predominantly.

### **Skills deficits:**

- IT skills among staff are assumed rather than taught.
- Skills deficits do not just relate to new systems, but can be as basic as editing PDFs, recording and uploading videos, or exporting Excel documents.
- IT skills are generational, meaning students may be more skilled than tutors.
- Skills may be differentially spread depending on department, with many trades not yet systematically using IT. This can impact take-up of new platforms.
- There is a known inequality of access to devices and functioning broadband among staff and even students.
- Colleges may not have yet established how digital capability sits with other policies, such as safeguarding and mobile phone use.

- Colleges are not good at making time for staff to get comfortable with new systems, and this matters given that functionality is affected by front-ended effort.
- Many of these issues are in transition due to the acceleration of digitalisation through the pandemic.

### **IT system failures:**

- The choice of system is critical to the success of an IT transformation project.
- Too often, the right people aren't in place from the start, from choice of system and specifications to implementation.
- Colleges, like many large institutions, may have multiple systems that are poorly integrated with each other.
- Poorly integrated systems impact on functionality and end-user frustration.

## 'What works' in college-based IT transformation projects

### Working through an operations perspective:

- Recognise that new IT systems involve substantial cultural and organisational change.
- Acknowledge how the new system or platform will impact on end users.
- IT transformation projects need to be driven by the college leadership and located in IT who have the skills to integrate the system effectively.

### Involve stakeholders:

- End users need to be involved at all stages of the process, specifying what is needed, implementation and ongoing evaluation. Involving them at pre-tender stage will help colleges make the right choice of system.
- Project leaders need to show end users how the system will benefit them.

- Work across silos to build collaboration across departments, so that each team appreciates the impact of decisions on other teams.
- Champions can help advocate for the system and train colleagues.

### Build an offline system:

Having an offline parallel system can help users practise the new system and any updates to it, without feeling as though they may 'break the system'.

### Deal with departmental differences:

- Recognise that different departments have varying levels of IT skills or awareness, and plan around it.
- With employers who may not be digitally savvy, be up front about the system you will be using from the start, and what the benefits are.
- Be firm with end users that they all have to work with the system – there are no alternatives.



### **Upskill staff:**

- Evaluate the digital skills of all staff and commit to retrain them around skills gaps.
- Offer easier ways to enable staff and other end users to learn new skills and new systems, such as video explainers.
- Make time and resources for end users to learn the new system.

### **System integration:**

- Make sure the system you choose at tender stage integrates with existing systems you want to retain. Staff should not have to do multiple data entry across all the systems, for example.
- End-to-end systems offer data integrity, which means issues like student progress and business performance can be tracked more effectively.

- Ensure there is flexibility or APIs built into the system for the future.
- Be careful that the scope does not get too large and over-complex.

### **Success metrics and evaluation:**

- Establish your metrics for the success of the new system from the beginning.
- Engage in ongoing evaluation of the new system and new updates, involving end users.

---

### **Georgina Burton<sup>1</sup>**

is the Head of Implementation at Aptem, and her role is to manage and improve implementation across all sectors. In previous roles she has worked as Group Director – Commercial and Digital, in Scope Services Ltd. and was Programme Leader – Apprenticeships at Moulton College, and Curriculum Leader BTEC Construction at Tresham College.

---

### **Shaun Elliott<sup>2</sup>**

is Product Director at Aptem. He has over 20 years' experience in the world of apprenticeships, large-scale operational delivery and software implementation. Prior to working at Aptem, he was Delivery Consultant at Bud Systems, Managing Director at 12 Monkeys Ltd, Principal Business Consultant at Tribal Group and eSystems Manager at Pearson.

---

### **Gary Hancox<sup>3</sup>**

is currently the Interim Head of Faculty for Construction, Engineering and Transportation at Petroc College, north Devon. He is also a member of the executive team and across-college director. Prior to this, Gary was Interim Partnerships & Commercial Transformation Officer at City College Plymouth. More broadly, he has worked as a consultant and interim manager at many different colleges across the UK, and also has experience in the commercial energy sector.

---

### **Dominic Scott**

is CRM/LMS Officer at Bradford College. He has worked at the college for nearly five years, and is responsible for the upkeep and data management of college systems. He is also responsible for the training of new and existing staff to ensure that best practice is being shared across the department, supporting where necessary.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/in/georgina-burton-229271136/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/in/shaun-elliott-82311664/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/in/gary-hancox-a9887764/>



---

## 1 Introduction

---

**IT or digital transformation is a concept that affects more than IT infrastructure in colleges. EDUCAUSE defines digital transformation<sup>4</sup> as:**

*“...a series of deep and coordinated workforce, culture, and technology shifts that enable new educational and operating models and transform an institution’s operations, strategic directions, and value proposition.”*

It potentially, and at its most effectively, influences everything about the way education and the institution function, from privacy and security to working patterns and pedagogy. Particularly when it comes to students, an efficient digital transformation can track student progress, identify attrition, help with learning choices, personalise learning to the student’s learning style, and enable flexible learning patterns, to name a few benefits. For staff, it can make laborious administration quicker

and easier, meaning more time is freed up for the interesting work of teaching and experimentation.

The pandemic has highlighted the need for colleges to catch up with both IT infrastructure and how it can most effectively transform learning, and indeed a report by JISC in 2020 brought together sector experts to establish what good practice might look like when it comes to delivering teaching. Among its recommendations were ring-fenced funding for the digital estate, secure and consistent connectivity for students and digital-pedagogic continual professional development for staff.

**“The pandemic has highlighted the need for colleges to catch up with both IT infrastructure and how it can most effectively transform learning, and indeed a report by JISC in 2020 brought together sector experts to establish what good practice might look like when it comes to delivering teaching.”**

<sup>4</sup> <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/1/how-colleges-and-universities-are-driving-to-digital-transformation-today>

However, estimates by the Boston Consulting Group showed that,<sup>5</sup> in companies, only 30% of IT transformation projects are successful. This is because, argues Antony Edwards, COO at Eggplant:

*"Too many people treat digital transformation as something around infrastructure and IT... It's not; it's about the company culture, it's about DNA, and it's about business models. And if you don't approach it from that kind of business and customer perspective, it's going to fail."*

Analyses of why digital transformation fails in business<sup>6</sup> say that projects lack leadership, they aren't seen as being about cultural change, a company doesn't have the right talent or skills to drive the project, there are no clear goals, and not giving projects the time to succeed (what is referred to as the 'fast fail' mentality).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/increasing-odds-of-success-in-digital-transformation>

<sup>6</sup> [https://searchcio.techtarget.com/tip/Top-6-reasons-why-](https://searchcio.techtarget.com/tip/Top-6-reasons-why-digital-transformation-failures-happen)



A report by Canvas<sup>7</sup> analysed FE experiences of digital transformation, and argued that colleges lacked formal guidance to help them make the right buying choices. It found that successful IT transformation required involving wide groups of end users and stakeholders, time to ensure successful adoption and holistic ways of evaluating its success. All these issues, and more, were raised by our experts.

It is evident that the way IT transformation is being viewed in colleges is changing as a result of the pandemic. A white paper published by Education Software Solutions,<sup>8</sup> which interviewed IT directors and CEOs, argued that IT departments, and those who lead them, are playing a more strategic role in recent years. Colleges are making significant investments in new technology and are looking at how it affects how learning and learning delivery happens in these institutions.

The paper argues that colleges need to adopt a digital strategy, to see how technologies adopted align with the functionality of colleges and the corporate vision. Other factors of importance include upskilling staff and updating teaching and learning strategies.

Many of the insights generated by these investigations are shared by our experts. However, together they offer new insights into how digital transformation feels on the ground, both from the perspective of colleges and from a company involved in implementing SaaS software in a particularly complex area of learning delivery – apprenticeships.

<sup>7</sup> <https://edtechnology.co.uk/latest-news/new-digital-transformation-in-fe-report-released/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://ess-unit-e.co.uk/resources/whitepaper/delivering-digital-transformation-and-innovation-further-education>



---

## 2 IT transformation projects in colleges – pinch points

---

There are some clear and identifiable organisational issues that arise when implementing IT transformation projects in college settings. These come under three headings:

---

### 1. Organisational culture

---

### 2. Skills deficits

---

### 3. IT system failures

We will explore each of these in turn.

#### 1. Organisational culture

Colleges have suffered systematic underfunding<sup>9</sup> over a long period of time, although the UK government has planned additional funding. Staff wages have not been sustained over decades, and many FE tutors are part-time and contracted annually. The Education & Training Foundation's Further Education Workforce Data for 2020<sup>10</sup> showed that 46% of FE

staff work part-time, and median pay for teaching staff is falling. This all has an impact on how IT transformation projects sit within the culture of FE colleges.

Georgina Burton, Head of Implementation at Aptem, who worked in colleges for many years, said:

*"I think there's the fear that the IT is going to replace someone, 'they're bringing IT in, they won't need me any more,' or, 'I won't be as valuable,' or, as tutors, 'we'll do it all by video lectures so I won't need to stand in front of the classes.'"*

This element of a fear of being replaced was also expressed by Gary Hancox, Interim Head of CET at Petroc, who talked about the fear of replacement and the preference for *"continuing with what we've had"*.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-54162340>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/news/2020-further-education-workforce-data-for-england-report-published/>



Dominic Scott, CRM/LMS Officer at Bradford College, also referred to the struggle to adapt to change. He talked about one system being chosen because a manager was friends with the person who led the company. *"He knew he could get a discount, so it was more of a 'who you know' type thing. When he left, they decided to replace the system with one that directly met apprenticeship needs."*

Shaun Elliott, Product Director at Aptem, talked about organisational culture when explaining what issues come up in working with colleges:

*"One thing you have to understand is that colleges are very focused on the student, so maybe IT isn't at the top of their list of priorities necessarily. And they are focused on all types of students, not just apprentices. Also, they are very different environments to commercially driven ones; there isn't that chain of accountability necessarily, so it's very difficult to get someone in place who is actually going to move the project forward."*

The people we talked to also referred to a disconnect between management and the IT department, with the college leadership not necessarily understanding what level of work was needed to implement a new system. Scott explains:

*"For the people who make decisions about what systems and data we need and we use, it's easy to default to, 'yep, we'll do that,' but then fully understanding what's required and the back-end workings behind to get the systems up to the requirements they need is very different from what they may initially understand."*

There is also a disconnect between end users/the institution and the department implementing the new software. Says Elliott:

*"A lot of the change projects in colleges seem to be managed by an IT department and it's seen as an IT project. The challenge then is that the operators and the operations teams are either not involved in that decision-making*



*process, or they are not treated as subject-matter experts. With training providers, it's usually led more from a quality aspect or an operations team, and all kinds of senior parties are involved."*

Elliott said that there are some examples of colleges setting up separate training providers for apprenticeships within the college and running them as a separate entity, and as such, "they had some autonomy to be able to work in a way that fits that kind of delivery model."

Burton also referred to this disconnect when reflecting on Aptem implementations:

*"What too often happens is the decision maker who sits at the top of the organisation and thinks it's a good idea to implement a system, hasn't actually spoken to the end user, and they may well be fixing a problem that doesn't actually exist. If you don't get buy-in from across the organisation, the champions and exec teams can be really, really happy with the way the system is designed and built*

*but the tutors don't feel the same way. If you can't get buy-in from across an organisation - all stakeholders - it's going to be much harder to be successful because you're going to be trying to force people down a route they're not happy with."*

Hancox also referred to working silos when considering the success of IT transformation projects. However, he felt the project should be owned by IT systems and processes, so that they are able to properly integrate the new software into their other systems. However, you needed the right people around the table. Offering an example of a new CRM system in his own college, he said:

*"...the Chief Executive is having a massive influence on this, and that's important, but he isn't likely to be the core user; it also needs the people that use it and use it regularly, then they can start and expand on what that needs."*

In summary, therefore, it is evident there is plenty of anxiety about technological change in colleges, and in the next section we will look more at the possible origins of those fears relating to IT transformation projects, particularly when it comes to tutors.

More broadly, there is an issue relating to the organisational structure of colleges which means that there is both a wider lack of involvement in the detail or back-end of IT transformation, and a wider lack of engagement of stakeholders in the design and implementation process.

## **2. Skills deficits**

All four people we spoke to said the problems with resistance to IT transformation also came from insufficient IT skills. This is an issue that has been discussed widely; for example, a report by the Edge Foundation<sup>11</sup> discussed how staff often felt underconfident about using new technologies in front of

<sup>11</sup> <https://feweeek.co.uk/how-edtech-can-transform-further-education-post-lockdown/>

students as they feared it may go wrong. The Education & Training Foundation has a dedicated service<sup>12</sup> to support the FE sector to upskill.

Both Scott and Burton talked about a way of working in colleges where IT skills were assumed rather than taught. Burton explains:

*"Teachers don't like to admit they've got a skills deficit. I don't think the education sector, not just colleges, is doing enough about that skills deficit. You don't want to admit you can't use the computer, but if you can't use the computer you need training. If someone can't drive, you wouldn't expect them to drive lorries without training, but you can shove an online system in front of a tutor and say, 'get on with it!'"*

She went on to describe a training deficit that went beyond simply adjusting to a new system. Often, she said, the problem is that the lack of skills relates to ancillary tasks such as editing a PDF,

uploading a video or exporting Excel documents. She describes an encounter with a tutor who was having difficulty uploading a video. The file size was too large, because the recording had not been turned off after the end of the teaching session. But the tutor didn't know how to find out the file size, let alone know how to cut the video.

*"Teachers don't like to admit they've got a skills deficit. I don't think the education sector, not just colleges, is doing enough about that skills deficit. You don't want to admit you can't use the computer, but if you can't use the computer you need training."*

The difficulty in colleges is two-fold in origin. Firstly, IT capability – both in terms of systems and spread of access to computers – is relatively new to college settings. Burton describes a slow transition from mostly paper-based or acetate

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/edtech-support/news/2020-further-education-workforce-data-for-england-report-published/>



teaching materials where there was one computer per ten students, to a gradual shift towards greater IT capability: WiFi, laptops, access via smartphones and so on. And even if IT services are improving, the pandemic revealed an enduring inequality of access to devices, both among students and teachers:<sup>13</sup>

*"Access was always a massive, massive issue, and I suppose that would only ever be resolved if every student had a dedicated device that was stable, consistent and robust. I don't think we are there yet."*

However, even with enhanced IT systems, says Burton, it can clash with existing policies such as safeguarding, internet security, the permissibility of using mobile phones in classrooms, tutor access to devices and college-funded WiFi data bundles, and there is a sense that we haven't quite arrived at a place where the boundaries are in the right place.

Secondly, IT take-up is unevenly spread among the subject areas. Both Scott and Burton referred to trades like construction and even engineering, which (depending on the company) are still largely paper-based. Says Scott:

*"In the more construction-based trades, they're on-site pretty much all day every day and they're not office based, they probably don't have a work computer or a laptop or anything else like that. Getting them to engage with the idea they need to be logging on to complete their compliance documents, to do reviews, checking your students progress, they're probably thinking, 'I'm really busy, I'm in the middle of... I've not got time for this.'"*

Skills are also generational. All of those we spoke to talked about a generation gap in skills levels, which are not addressed in terms of staff training. This can really impact on the success of IT transformation projects. Burton, for example, talked about how the

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.fenews.co.uk/press-releases/74203-poor-digital-access-and-lack-of-tech-for-uk-teachers-holding-back-remote-learning-new-survey-shows>

generation gap might relate to people's fears of using technology:

*"Sometimes there is this generation divide where our students can be more capable than our tutors from a technology perspective, and that scares people. This could result in tutors avoiding using technology in the classroom. These students are digital natives."*

Lastly everyone referred to a lack of time for embedding new software within the workplace. Hancox said that, when there is a new system, much of the work to get the system functioning correctly is front-ended. Talking about implementing ProMonitor in a college setting, for example, he said *"you've got to put the hard yards in at the beginning."* Only when you spend the time inputting data will it yield rewards of useful information. However, time is an issue:

*"...they've got to give these systems time right at the beginning, and they've got to give their staff time. Implementation is critical. We all want them in for the August/September new intake but you can't just start doing that over the summer period when you've got no people there and saying, 'oh, you've got a three-month implementation,' and expect them to start it in May. It's just not going to happen. We don't give it enough time."*

He argued that often it is a question of resources. Unlike universities or the private sector, colleges have been relatively cash-starved for many years. This does not help when introducing new software, even when it promises to deliver savings.

In conclusion, there can be a clash between the ambitions of colleges to update and improve technology and the skill levels of staff in particular, which can affect the success of an IT transformation

project. However, the question of IT uptake is not simply a question of skills. Technology must work well and improve functionality rather than make it more difficult. Staff are not given enough time to adjust to it. This moves us on to our final collection of issues – IT system failures.

### 3. IT system failures

We've already explored how the FE sector has been slow to digitalise, not aided by its persistent underfunding. In addition, inequalities of access, where students are forced to rely on their own devices, are affecting outcomes.

Another issue highlighted by those we spoke to, however, was how new systems are adopted by institutions. This is an issue of multiple systems and poor integration, making the experience poor for the end user. Says Burton:

*"Badly designed systems can create work, and resentment can build up if you just keep buying*

*systems and layering them on top of each other. As a result all you seem to do is spend time moving information from one place to another. IT should enhance what you do, not give you more work. So often badly integrated systems actually work against each other."*

The sense is that the way IT shouldn't work is to keep on buying in new systems without thinking about how they work together, which results in poor integration and much more work for staff. And if staff feel that systems are creating more work rather than less, there is much less buy-in and every incentive to declare it doesn't work. Scott described the situation at Bradford College before they updated to Aptem:

*"One of the issues we had as a college, as an apprenticeship department, is that we had quite a few different systems. We had the CRM system that the recruiting*

*team were using, and they'd do all their matching on there, and we had about two or three different LMS systems. None of them were linked, none of them spoke together, so it was a lot of transference of data, and a lot of digging around in different systems and even spreadsheets."*

Burton also described a similar situation at a former college:

*"I ran the apprenticeships offering in a college and we got to the stage at one point where we had about five systems which tutors needed to use because of college systems. When you actually started to explain to somebody new coming into the business, 'well, you've got to do this with this, and then move this from this, and then you've got to keep this one up to date because this particular department looks at that,' you realise how technology starts to become unwieldy, and problem in and of itself."*

For Hancox, the system chosen comes before all other problems that occur with IT transformation projects:

*"... it starts with system choice for me, and that's really got to be nailed down at the very beginning, whoever's going to do this they've got to have the information to hand as to what they want to achieve. We're going through that for instance at Petroc at the moment. It's about getting the right people on board and asking them to specify what they really need at the beginning of the process."*

*"It starts with system choice for me, and that's really got to be nailed down at the very beginning, whoever's going to do this they've got to have the information to hand as to what they want to achieve."*

Layered and non-integrated systems do not just potentially create frustration among users, they also have implications for data generation and efficiency.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.projectline.ca/blog/5-ways-disparate-systems-negatively-impact-smes>



Too many disparate systems lead to poor reporting, data errors, too many manual person hours spent in administration, and additional costs in IT management and staff training.

To summarise, in the race to solve problems, often new software packages and systems are introduced with little thought about if, and how, they can be integrated. This lack of integration and effectiveness has multiple impacts on digital performance.

### **Conclusion**

So far, we have looked at three common problems that arise when it comes to IT transformation projects in the college sector. These we have broadly termed organisation culture, skills deficits and IT system failures.

We will now turn to looking at what our experts had to say about 'what works' when it comes to IT transformation projects.



---

### 3 'What works' in college-based IT transformation projects

---

The ideas of good practice the people we spoke to shared are not exhaustive, and there will be other ideas colleges can usefully deploy to make IT transformation projects more successful.

However, we hope this usefully starts the conversation about how to implement IT in college settings in a way that benefits the institution and the end users – administrators, tutors and students.

Much of what we reveal here is pertinent to the apprenticeship framework, which has some very specific issues around compliance that necessitate a more bespoke approach. However, there are aspects of the apprenticeship experience that can be useful elsewhere in the college digital environment.

The areas we want to focus on here are:

- 
- Working through an operations perspective
  - Involve stakeholders
  - Build an offline system
  - Deal with departmental differences
  - Upskill staff
  - System integration
  - Success metrics and evaluation
- 

#### Work through an operations perspective

Operations is looking at the entirety of your organisation and working out ways to make it function more efficiently. When looking at problems occurring with IT transformation projects in IT settings, one perspective was that new systems need to not be seen as purely an IT project. While Hancox said that it should be run and implemented by IT, that does not mean to say it is purely an IT project.



New digital systems involve substantial cultural and operational change, and so the potential impact of new systems on the entire organisation, what a good system looks like and how they can be implemented in the most efficient way possible, need to be considered.

And according to our experts, those decisions need to be driven from the top down rather than relegated entirely to the IT department. Says Elliott:

*“Driving it from the top down by giving it the right resources and considering the level of cultural change needed – the time and effort which needs to be put into how people are going to feel or how it’s going to affect them, how it’s going to change the way they work on a day-to-day basis – is critical.”*

However, if it is only top-down it is also not going to work. The key message is seeing a new IT system as a cultural and organisational change project. And that means involving stakeholders at every stage of the process.



### Involve stakeholders

Colleges are large and complex places, with many different types of staff and students, culturally different departments, and, when it comes to apprenticeships and other skills-based learning, employers.

All our respondents talked about the need for stakeholder involvement when reflecting on user needs, how a system should be configured, and what they need to make it work. Ultimately, the system has to make the working lives of users better, not worse, and those improvements should be clearly stated to them.

As Elliott says:

*"A successful college IT implementation is about winning hearts and minds. We need to show how it will improve their working day, reduce administration, enhance teaching delivery and, most importantly, benefit the student."*

Hancox gave the example of one college, where implementing a new software system did not go how it should:

*"...we can't do that (work in silos) and we realised that, we had to have the whole team there because the impact of what happened or what we were doing in one area or with one team had a knock-on effect on another team when you're implementing some of the systems."*

*"A successful college IT implementation is about winning hearts and minds. We need to show how it will improve their working day, reduce administration, enhance teaching delivery and, most importantly, benefit the student."*

Hancox said that the end users need to be involved from the beginning, at the pre-tender stage. They need to outline what they



want from a system, it then needs to be converted into technical language and then you put it out to tender. And then the right champions need to be involved throughout – understanding the system, practising using it, and instructing colleagues. However, sometimes the scope of the project can get too large, and take too long, which also creates complications. Teams should aim to define the scope, or breadth of the project, at the very start (acknowledging that needs may change, of course).

Scott explained that in Bradford College, the implementation of Aptem was successful because they had the right people steering the project from the beginning:

*“When we were putting out to tender, Aptem and a few other companies demonstrated their products for us. It was critical to have the right people with the right backgrounds sitting on that board to fully understand,*

*‘OK, is this going to be more suitable for us,’ and, ‘are we properly going to be able to implement this?’. The right people are influencing to ensure the right decisions being made.”*

Scott emphasised that those stakeholders included the head of department, people from the CRM and LMS sides of the team, the functional skills team, and anyone who was impacted. They would ask those teams, *“can you do this; will you be able to get your work out?”*

One idea commonly deployed is that of ‘champions’ – people located in different departments who can learn the system and can advocate for, and demonstrate it to, colleagues.

As he explained, each college is different and may have distinct configurations of stakeholders. So every college will need to work out, from an operations perspective, who are the best people to be involved.

### Build an offline system

Having a parallel offline system where people can practise using the new system or new features and updates in the long term can help IT staff and users. With an offline system, end users do not feel they will break the system if they make an error. They can practise before using the online system. Says Hancox:

*"As part of our Aptem implementation, one or two of the curriculum guys wanted to have a practice system alongside so they couldn't break it. They could try what they needed and see how it worked. Then when they applied their learnings to the live system they were ready. It was a good way to build their skills and their confidence rather than trying to gain these skills in a live environment."*

### Deal with departmental cultural differences

In section two, we discussed the different subject areas normally found in colleges and how these may respond to digitalisation.

Our respondents advocated an awareness of this in IT transformation projects and that some departments may need additional assistance or persuasion. Says Elliott:

*"Hair and beauty, care, are two of the sectors, and hospitality or construction. These sorts of sectors are not necessarily technology-savvy, because they don't need to be. They're not business admin roles, they're not sat in offices, they're not used to using digital technology or solutions on a day-to-day basis as part of their work. As a result it can be more difficult, or take more time, or it's more of a significant change. They may need more handholding than those departments delivering business admin, digital or IT-related programmes."*

This may particularly be an issue with employers in particular sectors. Scott explained how they deal with these kinds of sectors:

*"One of the first things we do with new employers now, and especially in construction and trade, is really try to get across to them from the beginning the benefit of using the system. We stress that all they've got to do is log in, create a digital signature, set up their account and then instead of us sending them contracts they've got to sign and send back... they just log in and it's a click of a button - it's as simple as that.*

*'When they get that first initial call, our recruitment team go through Aptem with them. Construction and trade are full of straight talkers so if you're honest and upfront with them I think they're more likely to engage and support: 'OK, fair enough, if we've got to do it we'll do it, we'll get it done!''*

Hancox also emphasised the need to be firm with end users:

*"I always say to them, 'if you want to carry on doing that then you do it, but I'm not interested in it, I don't want to see it, I'm not interested in that bit, all I want is this with the new system,' and the new system process actually takes over from there."*

### Upskill staff

We've already discussed at length the skills gap in colleges when it comes to IT. Our experts recommend that more time is spent on IT upskilling, from training on basic IT skills such as Excel, PDFs, simple video editing and so on to specific training on the new platforms a college chooses to adopt. This is central to the success of IT transformation projects.

While Bradford College has a range of user guides, one change they found helpful was to create short video explainers for students and other stakeholders.

*"We emailed guides, but people's attention spans to sit there reading through guides, and the time involved alongside learning preferences, led us to start to create videos. Now we give people a choice, which is more helpful."*

When choosing a system, it's also useful to look at the range of support and training options available, not just related to implementation but updates and ongoing help in the form of a helpline too. Aptem, for example, enhanced the user experience by hosting webinars on various aspects of the system. Scott mentioned, for example, a webinar on learning plans in Aptem, which was promoted around the college.

It is critical that colleges make time for staff to learn the skills required to make new and existing systems work. Elliott talked about a successful implementation of new

systems in Sheffield City College, with whom he worked for a few years:

*"Sheffield City College is a huge college that I worked with over a period of years where it was very much part of their vision to move things forward...they took an approach where they involved every department that needed to be using the software, they would ensure that everyone was brought together, they gave them time, they gave them resources, and it sounds like complete common sense but it's not always the case in a college."*

Overall, it pays to know the capabilities of staff, employers and students when implementing a new system, and providing adequate training so that the system is used to its full potential. Colleges should make time for learning the new system, particularly, as Hancox argued, at the very beginning, which gives them



rewards in terms of functioning and data. And, of course, making sure all staff and students have the correct hardware and, if working from home, broadband capability to use the system.

### System integration

As much as the cultural and organisational factors matter, choosing the right system is paramount, as is making sure it integrates with existing systems and processes. This is particularly an issue for colleges as they normally have multiple systems, because they will need different systems for multiple functions and departments. As Burton argues:

*"Integration between systems and data integrity is critical to success. Whichever system you're looking at in college needs to have the same version of the truth, so the more you can make sure the systems you use work seamlessly together the more likely you're going to be successful. I don't think that's something that's always thought about."*

*"Integration between systems and data integrity is critical to success. Whichever system you're looking at in college needs to have the same version of the truth, so the more you can make sure the systems you use work seamlessly together the more likely you're going to be successful."*

She offered the example of student records being on multiple systems, and how easy it is to keep them up to date when thinking about introducing a new system. These issues need to be considered early on in the project.

Evidently no product is going to be without pinch points, but to Elliott, flexibility is key:

*"Selecting the product that it is going to give you flexibility is really, really key within a college, I don't think one size fits all would work, and the reason being, this is actually probably quite an important point, often each*

*department is effectively run as a separate entity, and they work in different ways."*

Hancox also mentioned flexibility as being a critical part of the success of a new system. While it was important to define the scope of an IT transformation project from the beginning, "*flexibility for the future*" in the form of APIs that can be installed without too much expense can help a system grow. However, he emphasised it was important to not get carried away, otherwise "*it gets bigger and bigger until ultimately you can't do anything with it and you don't achieve what you set out to do.*"

It may seem like an obvious point, but choosing a system that integrates effectively and flexibly with existing systems is a crucial aspect of the success of IT transformation. And if that service is also end to end, it offers data continuity, which matters when considering key apprenticeship KPIs from starts to student attrition.

## Success metrics and evaluation

The final issue is setting some benchmarks for the success of a digital transformation project. Our experts noted that each college may have different KPIs depending on their priorities. Aptem at Bradford College is evaluated in terms of its financial impact, how it improves student metrics and compliance. And Scott noted its importance as a source of data and reporting:

*"Aptem is definitely helping with report running and looking at the financials, the organisation reports, and the user generic reports. It's really handy to have that information and see where we're engaging, which programmes are popular. It helps with our annual planning: what areas do we want to target, where did we have most success last year, was it construction, was it engineering, was it business admin, and looking where our student pool is across the board."*

Both Hancox and Elliott argued that it is important to set these metrics out at the beginning. Said Elliott:

*"You could really put any sort of success criteria against a system implementation. It could be something really simple like are students logging in more, or it could be something more complicated. But setting this criteria out at the beginning, would enable a college to measure against it and then decide whether or not the system has been a success."*

Hancox added, *"I'm a great believer in having that scope set out at the beginning and that you can narrow it down and say, 'yes, we've achieved that'."*

A key part of measuring success is ongoing evaluation, says Burton:

*"In a good project you would always have an opportunity for reflection and lessons learned, an evaluation against your key metrics, and then fixing what's not quite right. Otherwise you could end up with something that's a little bit broken."*

Part of that evaluation is reverting to end users: Has the system made things better? What are the pain points? What part of the system annoys them? Burton argues that with any IT system, updates will always happen, and these need to be evaluated. Are end users sufficiently prepared? How will it affect their everyday working? These all need to be considered.

---

## 4 Conclusion

---

**This white paper has examined what the common problems are in college-based IT transformation projects and what good practices colleges can implement to better ensure their success.**

One of the key issues that stands out is that colleges need to understand how IT interacts with all college systems, staff and students, and this includes their deeply held feelings about digital delivery, their skill levels, and how it will change the way the college, and learning, functions.

The benefits of a well-designed system are, however, enormous. A good platform will simplify administration – allowing more time for teaching and learning, reduce student attrition by more closely monitoring engagement, and help compliance and business performance through optimal data collection and reporting.

Our white paper is just the beginning, however. By sharing best practice in a collaborative way, we hope that more IT transformation projects are successful. Colleges have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

“The benefits of a well-designed system are, however, enormous. A good platform will simplify administration – allowing more time for teaching and learning, reduce student attrition by more closely monitoring engagement, and help compliance and business performance through optimal data collection and reporting.”



Aptem products are developed by Aptem Ltd, pioneers in technology solutions for the vocational training, further education and employability sectors since 2009.

[enquiries@aptem.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@aptem.co.uk)  
**020 3758 8540**

**[www.aptem.co.uk](http://www.aptem.co.uk)**



Click and follow us on [LinkedIn](#)