Aligning IT and Business in Quest for Quality Education

Cisco Transformative Networking helps Fontys University of Applied Science create inspirational learning environment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Customer Name: Fontys University of Applied Science

Industry: Education

Location: Netherlands

Number of Employees: 4100

Challenge

· Change perception of IT as cost center

· Act as strategic partner to business units

· Create optimal digital learning environment

Solution

· Cisco Transformative Networking engagement, helping ensure smooth transition to new campus-wide infrastructure based on a validated Cisco Borderless Networks Architecture design

Results

· New understanding between IT and business

· Strategic roadmap aligning IT with educational goals

· Intelligent network as foundation for multiple projects

Challenge

Fontys University of Applied Science is one of the largest institutions of its kind in the Netherlands, with about 40,000 students on 10 different sites located mainly in the south of the country. Technology lies at the heart of the university's mission to provide the highest possible quality of education in the core disciplines of engineering, circus and performance art, healthcare, economics, and ICT.

A shared service center at Fontys delivers IT facilities to the university's 33 business units, which represent different subject areas within the core disciplines. Rather like franchise operations, the business units manage their own IT budgets while purchasing services from the center. Inevitably, the business units' desire to make decisions independently is sometimes at variance with the need to create an integrated IT environment for the university as a whole.

"Although the business units have always trusted the IT department, they used to view IT as a cost center instead of a source of added value," says Rens van der Vorst, innovations and projects manager at Fontys. "Our goal in IT was to shift perceptions so that we could effectively act as a strategic partner to the business units."

Higher education, like many fields of activity, has been going through a period of readjustment. That's driven by the introduction of new technologies such as smart devices that help enable new ways of communicating, teaching, and learning. As a result, debates about the effectiveness of certain educational models invariably take place alongside discussions about the appropriate IT solutions to support those models.

Fontys engaged in exactly that type of debate while preparing to issue a pan-European tender to replace its network, with IT and the business units thinking about an enterprise architecture that would support the university in achieving its educational objectives. "We knew there was common ground between IT and the business units, but we had to find it," says van der Vorst. "Before we could make any real progress, we needed help to develop better mutual understanding."

"The Transformative Networking process turned out to be the perfect way of understanding our organization and helping our organization understand itself."

Rens van der Vorst
Innovations and Projects Manager
Fontys University of Applied Science

Solution

The university's end-to-end Cisco network had provided excellent service over many years. During a discussion about the forthcoming tender, the IT team at Fontys asked Cisco for advice. "Cisco's response took us by surprise," says van der Vorst. "They told us they could help us think about an appropriate enterprise architecture with a view to achieving our educational goals."

Cisco proposed its Transformative Networking methodology, which helps organizations in the public and private sectors align their business requirements and IT planning. Fontys University saw the methodology as a means of quickly moving to a validated design that would provide a foundation for its digital learning environment.

The first stage of the process was a one-day workshop attended by business unit directors, members of the university's management board, and representatives of the IT team. Discussions started at the top level with the university's educational vision and objectives, and moved on to prioritizing those objectives and assessing their impact on the organization and its infrastructure.

The Cisco consultant who orchestrated the workshop helped to get all participants to open up and talk candidly. This provided a forum for each group to communicate about their roles, responsibilities, and goals for the university.

"Everyone agreed that Fontys aspires to offer the highest quality of education, but we soon discovered that for some people the word quality is about moral standards, while for others it's related to technical aspects of teaching," says van der Vorst. "Sometimes you need an external viewpoint to help you reach a deeper level of understanding."

The process of eliciting these, and similar, nuances of interpretation proved to be revealing, and acted as a catalyst for new and productive discussions. As the session continued, people began to see they had a lot of common ground. "There was a moment when I noticed people were really starting to understand each other," says van der Vorst. "It was a very interesting process and a good methodology; it just worked."

After the workshop, Cisco produced a unique architectural network roadmap for Fontys, based on the four main business priorities that emerged during the session:

- Improve the quality of education
- Support teachers in their changing roles
- Give substance to the university's social mission
- Create small-scale learning environments

The document summarized the impact of these business goals on IT, providing a snapshot of the current status of the university's network. It concluded with an IT action plan that highlighted technology interdependencies and prioritized recommendations according to their importance in attaining the business goals.

"The executive summary in the architectural network roadmap was well formulated, concise, and easy to communicate to the business," says van der Vorst, "and the document as a whole has proved to be of lasting value. We've incorporated it into our IT planning, and we regularly refer back to it."

Results

The IT team at Fontys used the roadmap to write a mission statement describing the transformation that would be necessary for the university to achieve its business goals. The IT team discussed the mission statement with the business units, with all parties finding it much easier to communicate and reach agreement as a result of the insights they had gained during the workshop.

> "There is a new confidence in the business units and the IT team that delivering high-quality education is something we can do together."

Rens van der Vorst
Innovations and Projects Manager
Fontys University of Applied Science

"Going through the Transformative Networking process helped to tie our investment to desired outcomes," says Rens van der Vorst. That process is still ongoing, and new measures are in place to assist the transformation. Fontys has set up a group that meets every two months to discuss IT strategy and make decisions, and its members include both business unit directors and board members.

Adopting a more strategic and collaborative approach is helping to change attitudes towards IT. Fontys stakeholders are less likely to judge an IT investment purely in terms of cost, because they now appreciate the educational rationale for each IT project. "There is a new confidence in the business units and the IT team that delivering high-quality education is something we can do together," says van der Vorst.

From a practical perspective, Fontys is working on a number of large projects designed to enhance its digital learning environment. Virtualizing the data center and moving certain services to the cloud is one priority, while upgrading the university's outdated wireless environment is another. Wireless usage is increasing by 30 percent each year, as growing numbers of users start connecting to the university network on multiple devices, and the IT team is investigating how to accommodate all those devices while managing them securely.

The foundation for these, and other, developments is an intelligent network based on the Cisco® Borderless Network Architecture. Different projects are proceeding at different rates, but significant progress is being made on the basis of the new alignment between IT and education. "The Transformative Networking process turned out to be the perfect way of understanding our organization and helping our organization understand itself," says van der Vorst.

For More Information

To find out more about how Cisco Transformative Networking can help you align business vision and technology planning please visit: www.cisco.com/go/services

For more information on Cisco Borderless Networks architecture, please go to: www.cisco.com/go/borderless

Product List

Cisco Services
- Transformative Networking as a means of moving to a validated Cisco Borderless Network design

CISCO