

The Oxford Partnership

Transforming the lives of young Saudi women

Passionate about improving opportunities for women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, The Oxford Partnership set out to deliver a high quality of vocational education at four female colleges in the country. It appointed Cutter to design and deliver a cost effective IT infrastructure that would enable it to transform women's lives through excellent teaching and learning.

Challenges Faced

The Oxford Partnership didn't want to compromise. It aimed to deliver an international standard of vocational education for young women in Saudi Arabia but, to do this, it absolutely had to have effective IT systems at all four of its colleges. There were some elements of IT at some locations, but almost no central IT infrastructure, no secure connectivity between colleges and no email.

From the outset, it was clear that setting up an effective IT infrastructure for the four colleges was not going to be straight-forwards. Few technology companies operate in the rural, northern regions of Saudi Arabia and even the simplest IT projects are frequently hampered by weaknesses in the national IT infrastructure. "We needed an IT partner that would be flexible – but also forgiving," says Magdalena Riley, Chief Operating Officer at The Oxford Partnership. "Our existing IT facilities were so minimal and our challenges so huge, that we knew it would take a special kind of organisation to help us achieve our goals."

Cutter made all the difference by:



Understanding the business goals and proposing an affordable solution



Liaising with global IT product vendors and small, local IT partners to deliver a virtualized infrastructure



Being flexible in the face of complex logistical issues and important cultural sensitivities



Designing a virtualized IT infrastructure that can be quickly scaled up for additional sites

“For a business with minimal resources, working in a difficult environment, Cutter’s flexible, partnership approach was absolutely crucial.”

Gill Craig

Director of Strategic Development, The Oxford Partnership

Services Provided

Cutter worked closely with The Oxford Partnership to plan the technical and logistical aspects of the project, taking into account the difficult desert terrain in the north of the country, as well as cultural sensitivities about women’s privacy and protection. “Cutter understood exactly what we needed right from the start,” recalls Riley. “Its proposals were affordable and doable.”

Cutter designed a virtualized server infrastructure for The Oxford Partnership, including local and centralised storage, and set up a secure private cloud to connect the four college sites. It created one centralised ‘hub’, in the college in the Saudi city of Medinah, and three remote ‘pods’ at the three outlying colleges, in a modular architecture that can be easily expanded in the future, if the company takes over or sets up more colleges.

Gill Craig, Director of Strategic Development at The Oxford Partnership believes that Cutter offers “a true partnership ethos.” She explains, “We found that Cutter was happy to provide support and offer suggestions that were outside of the original brief, but that nonetheless made a significant contribution to the success of our project. For a business with minimal resources, working in a difficult environment, Cutter’s flexible, partnership approach was absolutely crucial.”

According to Riley, one of Cutter’s key strengths was its ability to work with global IT suppliers to source the most suitable equipment, at the best price, and then liaise with local partners in Saudi Arabia to get the products delivered, installed and tested to schedule. Although this wasn’t part of the contract, Cutter also negotiated with Microsoft to help the business obtain education software licenses. “We had had so many painful experiences previously, dealing with IT suppliers via Saudi partners,” Riley says. “We were probably the first educational facility in Saudi Arabia to benefit from educational software licences, ten times less than the price originally quoted by Microsoft’s local partner.”

Results Achieved

The new virtualized IT infrastructure designed by Cutter is now helping to improve the quality of teaching and learning at the four colleges. Teachers can create lesson plans and teaching resources electronically and then share them with other teachers, in other colleges. They can also access their files using Microsoft OneDrive from whichever site they are at, improving their mobility. “Cutter has given us the IT infrastructure that will allow teachers to build and share best practices,” explains Craig.

The private cloud implemented by Cutter allows The Oxford Partnership to run virtual classrooms, and make lessons with specialist teachers accessible to students across all four colleges. Craig says, “As education is strictly segregated in Saudi Arabia, our female students could not be taught by a man, but now, if there is a male subject specialist, we can bring him virtually into the classroom, creating amazing new learning opportunities for our students.”

With access to leading IT applications, email and the Internet, students can now develop skills that are transferable from the classroom out into the workplace. They can go online to learn about other towns, countries and cultures, vastly different from their own; create and save work on the college network; and share ideas with colleagues and teachers within the college community. “In so many ways, our IT infrastructure is enabling us to transform women’s lives, by empowering them to take on roles in business,” says Riley.

In addition, the new IT infrastructure improves the sustainability and cost efficiency of The Oxford Partnership’s operations in Saudi Arabia. IT technicians can easily maintain PCs across all four sites, from the central IT department. Equally, senior managers can access student records, admission systems and financial systems remotely, from any location. These improvements create time savings and free up staff to concentrate on initiatives to further enhance opportunities for Saudi women.