

NETWORKSHOP

THE FURTHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE



Networkshop is an annual event organised by UKERNA.¹ Each event is hosted by a Higher Education Institution – Networkshop 32 was held at the University of Keele from 6-8 April 2004, and Networkshop 33 will be at the University of Manchester.² The conference is aimed at network managers and technical staff from the JANET community, providing a forum for discussion on the latest network technologies and bringing together expertise from all the fields of networking.

One regular attendee at Networkshop is Paul Taylor, who for six years has been Computer Services Manager at Loughborough College. Paul has been going to Networkshop since 2000.

The four-pronged approach

The Networkshop conferences have four particular elements that make them value for money, Paul says.

Staff development

Networkshop has become a fixture, not just for Paul but for his staff. Each year it is part of the staff development budget and the Personnel Data Record (PDR) process.

'I knew that my staff would benefit from going. They might go away on other training courses and educate themselves with Microsoft training packages, but they were not getting out and meeting people – seeing what they're doing, seeing how they behave. They were too cocooned in the College, working.'

As well as seeing what their own work is about, he says, the extra perspectives gained at Networkshop also help technicians understand the pressures of his own job, which in turn helps them all work together more closely.

The people

More than anything else, Networkshop is a chance to meet with people in similar situations, with similar problems and perhaps different solutions. Networkshop, he says, 'helps you sow relationships for the future and reinforce relationships you previously had.'

The extra exposure to colleagues at the conference has enabled Paul to bring a lot of planned work forward. 'Since Networkshop we've bought five servers, converted and consolidated our network, and just moved up to Active Directory 2003,' he says. 'That was meant to be a summer job. I'm well ahead of schedule now.'

Likewise, the front end of the College library is connected to XP and its new domain is active – also ahead of schedule. None of this came out of a particular Networkshop session, but it did come out of meeting people informally who were able to give valuable advice as they compared notes. Networkshop is a chance to talk to the decision makers, and to the technicians who have influenced them.

NETWORKSHOP 33
will be held at the University of
Manchester, 22-24 March 2005. For
details see

[http://www.ja.net/conferences/
networkshop/](http://www.ja.net/conferences/networkshop/)

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The sessions

It is the sessions that are the heart of Networkshop, and Paul praises their honesty. 'The sessions aren't all about "look how good we are",' he says. 'They say, "these are the mistakes we have made too."'

The sessions also provide another reason for taking along more than one colleague. Paul says:

'Although I'm technical I'm not a mega-tech. There are times you need a technician with you when you find out what's on offer. Also, there are so many things to go and see and you can't split yourself.'

The group will go to different events at Networkshop, then come back together and discuss what they have seen. It helps them make recommendations to each other about their work back at the College, and Paul says the technicians give very positive feedback.

The suppliers

A vital part of Networkshop, as far as Paul is concerned, is the suppliers who also go. 'I wouldn't be as enthusiastic about going myself if they didn't,' he says bluntly. 'I'm more interested in practical applications than the theory.'

Suppliers at the exhibition provide the opportunity to see what is new on the market and hence in the field. Firms supplying network hardware, software and services present themselves to the technical experts and managers who decide on the expenditure for the academic community. As Paul says,

'If a new product is talked about in a plenary session, it will be in the exhibition two or three years later.'

"I'm more interested in practical applications than theory"

"Networkshop helps you sow relationships for the future and reinforce relationships you previously had"

However, suppliers might also deliver sessions themselves, and Paul is complimentary about how they do it.

'Manufacturers do follow the guidelines, which say that they don't sell their products while they're doing the presentations. And they are useful people to meet. I've no doubt that the provider of our next core switch will be someone we saw at Networkshop.'

Being busy

Paul is a busy man, as is any Computer Services Manager in an FE environment. What would he say to people in his position?

'People say, "I'm too busy". Well, I'm busy but I make a point of putting the time in. If you're too busy, there are people within your college whom you can send. If you can't find the time yourself, send somebody else.'

Notes

¹ UKERNA manages and develops JANET, the UK's high-speed education and research, under a Service Level Agreement from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) of the UK Further and Higher Education Funding Councils.

² Further details of Networkshop can be found at <http://www.ja.net/conferences/networkshop/>.