The British Council

Case Study

Background

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. Founded to create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and the wider world, the organisation has locations on six continents in more than 100 countries. By delivering programmes and services in the English language, arts, education and in society, the British Council connects millions of people with the United Kingdom every day.

Digital transformation has been a key priority for the organisation for a number of years in an effort to stay on top of the many challenges and opportunities offered by digitisation. A key part of this has been developing more personalised services around the world and meeting the rising global demand for English. For example, the organisation has been supporting key English learning communities in the Middle East through online platforms and has delivered its first Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) through the e-learning platform FutureLearn.

> *"Not only have we seen a huge improvement in uptime as a result of development work carried out by Ixis, it's also given us the ability to update and improve our sites in a much quicker way."*
>
> *Nick Morgalla, Head of Digital Operations, British Council*

Challenges

The British Council's web infrastructure includes a global site, approximately 110 country websites, 10-15 project websites and various smaller micro-sites. Anticipated growth is approximately one site per month, with the introduction of E-commerce sites by the end of 2016. Online traffic has exceeded 15 million unique visits and 100 million page views per quarter.

In 2011, the decision was made to completely redevelop the entire British Council web infrastructure using the open source Drupal content-management framework to enable increased functionality and ease of management.

It soon became apparent that there were challenges in terms of stability and performance of the network of sites. This was making it difficult to add and manage content on individual sites. New feature deployments were also slow, impacting both development throughput and the ability of more than 1,000 content editors around the world.

With the Drupal platform up and running, attention turned to a second phase of development. The British Council were looking to make it even easier to run updates to individual sites and to boost reliability and performance across their online estate.

"After a competitive G-Cloud pitch, we contracted with Ixis," said Nick Morgalla, Head of Digital Operations at the British Council. *"We were impressed with their vision for the second phase of our web infrastructure development."*

The Solution

In 2015, Ixis led the migration of the entire British Council network of sites to containers hosted on infrastructure provided by hosting partner Platform.sh. These containers function as independent sections of an overall server, with each one dedicated to a particular site or aspect of a site. This container-based hosting platform, for which Ixis, in collaboration with the Digital team, developed a bespoke Drupal deployment workflow for initial migration and future updates, allows the network to share common functionality and development where possible while also allowing individual sites to be updated through their separate containers in a more timely way. Additional development work carried out by Ixis helped the British Council to tailor the container infrastructure and set up to suit their site requirements. This agile and bespoke approach means new products and services can be brought to market sooner, while reducing costs and streamlining the overall development process.

Benefits of the container-based hosting platform also include added protection for sites traffic spikes elsewhere on the network, with each container ring fenced to protect its server resources, as well as increased utilisation of infrastructure hardware, with more sites now able to run on a single server.

The project required Ixis to migrate 116 sites in total, a process which was completed by October 2015. Ixis now deliver ongoing service management and 24/7 Drupal application support to the British Council, to ensure its network of sites remain accessible and secure. This includes regular security updates, development support across the container-based hosting platform and agile change management to allow for a mix of new sites, features and service improvements. Ixis ensures a 30 minute incident response time so any issues across the network are quickly identified and resolved. Monthly service reviews and reports are produced, with regular meetings to ensure continuous improvement and discuss future development plans for delivering the British Council's digital transformation goals.

"The support we receive from Ixis is excellent," said Nick Morgalla. *"They continue to help ensure our infrastructure is capable of delivering our objectives by ensuring a consistent, high quality service for our organisation and online users."*

The Results

The new system has overcome the problems associated with production outages and slow development times. Live performance, reliability and availability have also improved, with uptime exceeding British Council targets of 99.9% and average page load times greatly reduced.

The British Council now benefits from an agile development approach that enables better workflow and testing processes and allows development to be scaled to meet the requirements for new functionality. This has included the introduction of e-commerce functionality as the organisation increasingly looks to sell its services through its online platforms, Deployment times for site feature updates, for example, have been reduced from several hours to around 30 minutes per week as a result of development work carried out by Ixis. The project also won the 'Infrastructure as an Enabler' award at the 2016 Real IT awards.

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Nick Morgalla, Head of Digital Operations, British Council

Nick Morgalla concluded: *"The web infrastructure project has played such a critical part of our wider digital transformation. We recognise that the digital medium is the single most important source of innovation for organisations like ourselves and with the completion of the project we've experienced huge improvements across every KPI. Ultimately, this means that British Council employees around the world can continue to communicate our message and innovate with new services that create more international opportunities for the UK."*

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Ixis are a technical agency specialising in Drupal services including development, hosting and support.

With over 10 years experience we have obtained one of the strongest and most diverse Drupal specific portfolios in the UK ranging from large enterprises to public sector organisations, national charities and start up businesses.