Case study: SA Department for Education finds a better way to scale student data

By Athina Mallis on Jul 5, 2023 2:00PM

The South Australian Department for Education realised the way it used its student data wasn't scalable and needed a new platform to help them get the most out of its data.

Ben Temperly, chief operating officer at the South Australian Department for Education discussed with Digital Nation how the journey they took to better use their data.

He said in terms of the full volume of data they hold as an agency, what they bought into their original data warehouse was only a very small portion.

From that, the department used Microsoft Power BI as a data visualisation tool which helped schools understand the learning and development outcomes for their students. But Temperly said this approach was not scalable enough.

"If we were to adopt a truly, enterprise-wide approach to how we use, transform, and then report data, something different was needed," he explained.

"Over that period of time, there was a great deal of technological change, cloud-based environments became available. It was on the back of an understanding of the limitations of our current approach plus the opportunities that new technology provided."

Temperly said working with Exposé has challenged their current way of thinking about the way they handle their data.

"Even their approach to project delivery and adopting a truly agile project methodology to the degree which we have with this project is something that we hadn't done previously," he said.

"It's been challenging in a good way, it's worked well for us."

In terms of achievement, Temperly said the technology is in place and it's working well.

"Now it's a process for us in terms of ingesting more data into the environment, and the production of the data products from that," he said.

Up until now, the department has been focused on three broad domains of data. Using Exposé, Temperly said the department was able to expand its scope.

"That is the information about the students enrolled in our services, people and culture, HR-related data and finance. The work we've done today over the last 18 months has been focused on those three areas," he said.

"As we expand the work program and scope of the data that the program will cover, we're looking at areas such as infrastructure, capital asset planning, forecasting for the needs of future schools, preventative maintenance, and repairs information."

The other two areas for the department is early childhood and students with additional needs.

"Looking at the types of information we want to capture, provide for children before they start school," he said.

"Also, students with additional needs, can we get a better handle on the outcomes we're achieving for students with additional needs, but also the services that we provide by bringing data related to them into this environment as well?"

Etienne Oosthuysen, co-founder and CIO at Exposé explained how the company has set the SA Department of Education up for their future endeavours.

"The world has become more complex and you can't possibly pick up a template that a vendor gives you and say this is how you're going to implement a complex ecosystem like this," he said.

"You have to work closely with the stakeholders to understand not just the things you're going to do now, but things you want to do in two, three or four years time."

For example, Oosthuysen said they know AI is a focus that's coming for the department so they've been set up to account for that future integration.

"We've set up the platform and chosen those technologies within the Microsoft stack carefully and architected it in such a way that we can achieve those longer term aspirational things," he ended.

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