![LIMA — Insight-led IT services]

Immutable backup through LIMA reduces ransomware risk for Trafford College Group.

With five locations spread across two boroughs of Greater Manchester, serving 10,000 students and more than 1,200 staff, Trafford College Group's four-year increase in growth could have made them more vulnerable to cyber attacks – had they not opted for immutable backup within their broader data solution from LIMA.

Trafford College Group (TCG) is a general further education (FE) college, offering a broad spectrum of post-16 courses, from vocational training to traditional education such as A levels, and a growing distance education service.

A secure relationship for 10 years

LIMA's partnership with TCG started in 2012 when we completed a storage and server refresh for the college's two campuses, Altrincham and Stretford. We deployed FlexPods by Cisco and Netapp at both campuses, with all backups done through Netapp SNAPMirror software.

Those storage solutions were reaching their end of life when TCG approached us for another refresh.

A merger in 2017 had brought Stockport College into the TCG fold. In 2020, Cheadle College and Marple Sixth Form College joined the group after a second merger. Today the five campuses are complemented by a number of small vocational training facilities including at Trafford Centre, Manchester Airport, and local hospitals.

David Fitton, Director of IT and Digital Services for TCG describes the work involved in stitching together all the different IT systems as, "a considerable challenge".

With a new storage solution from LIMA, TCG now house their main system – a VMware storage area network (SAN) – at Altrincham campus. Stockport, with its new server room, is their disaster recovery site with backup from a Veeam system through LIMA. On top of that, immutable backup gives off-site backup, through the LIMA cloud.

Essentially the college has a non-immutable backup that goes to one of LIMA's data centres as well as an immutable backup that goes to a different data centre.

"This latest storage project with LIMA has been about three years in the making, but we're nearly there," Fitton says. When the project is complete, TCG will have seven days of backups they can fall back on.

Education sector under siege

TCG's cyber insurance requires them to have physically separated, immutable backup. The other main driver is the increasing risk of ransomware attacks in the education sector. "Having that separation and knowing that the data cannot be changed is vital now," Dave says. "It's a need-to-have."

According to Fitton, every industry is under threat of ransomware attacks, but education is seen as an easy target. Colleges don't have the resources that many private companies have to throw at cybersecurity teams; they just don't have the specialists inhouse.

When it comes to cybersecurity updates, TCG takes their lead from Jisc, the UK's digital, data and technology not-for-profit organisation which helps institutions transform digitally. "Particularly for FE, higher education (HE) and adult education, Jisc is our go-to for cyber security advice," Fitton says. And what Jisc experts are relaying is that ransomware attacks are a growing problem.

"Some describe us as being 'under siege'," Fitton says.

There have been cases where colleges and universities have lost whole systems and been down for weeks at a time. Add to that insider risk from the college's own students, and non-malicious attacks, e.g., accidental data deletions by staff, and an IT director can have some sleepless nights.

Without immutable backup, TCG's backups would all be online. In a ransomware attack, those backups could be targeted as well, and they could lose all their data. "Having immutable backup definitely gives us peace of mind," says Fitton. "The air gapping is a huge comfort."

The LIMA-TCG partnership

Even back in 2012, TCG remarked on LIMA's customer service and proactive support. "I was involved in the original refresh, and LIMA gave us a good clear technical overview of it, so we knew it would fit our needs," Fitton says.

Now he sees LIMA's people as a part of the FCG team. "From project management and account management to the technical side of things, LIMA fits well in our business," he says. The knowledge transfer that happens through the deployment process also helps Fitton's team learn and grow.

In challenging technical situations, LIMA's guidance and support are invaluable. "We have a very small in-house team on the infrastructure side of things, and having five campuses is quite a big ask for that team. It's great to be able to offload some of that work to LIMA.

Having that external support, with a team that can look at problems like ransomware risk and solve them for us, is really essential."

As Fitton says, "We have that trust in LIMA to be able to put the right solution in place."

Call us to discuss how your FE, HE or adult education institution could benefit from immutable backup through LIMA.

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