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Use VAR To Augment Small IT Staff

This seminary used an integrator to squeeze more out of its staff and budget.

BY GENNIFER BIGGS

IN 2000, WHEN ANNE KEATING ARRIVED at the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in New York, she found its IT infrastructure lagging behind its needs. Well, lagging might be an understatement. "We had one file server supporting 40 employees on the network, most faculty had dial-up e-mail with an outside company, and our students [about 200] were on their own," says Keating. As CTO for the seminary, Keating faced quite a challenge. Luckily, a colleague's reference led her to AllSector Technology Group, a systems integrator and application developer with a nontraditional background that made it the perfect fit for Keating's situation.

Find A Partner Who Speaks Your Language

Chuck Schwartz, director of business development for AllSector, explains, "We were the IT department for one of New York's largest nonprofit healthcare organizations [FEGS Health and Human Service System] and then in 1998 they spun us off as a for-profit company. We specialize in IT services for many companies, plus nonprofits, healthcare, and social service organizations because we come from that, we understand it, and we speak the language." For the seminary, now a 190-plus-year-old nonprofit with about 60 employees and 300 students, pairing with AllSector in 2000 was kismet. "The seminary was a small, but growing, nonprofit with both technology and budget challenges," says Schwartz. "We understood those challenges and made a plan with Anne Keating to get the seminary from where it was to where it is now." During the eight-year partnership between the seminary and AllSector, the company has served as an off-site technology partner for Keating, working with her to move the campus from a sole server to a fully functioning wireless site. "We have probably invested between \$50,000 and \$80,000 into our infrastructure each year until just a few years back," explains Keating. AllSector has installed 10 Microsoft-based servers that handle Web hosting, applications, and databases that integrate data from the prospective student stage through alumnihood. AllSector also implemented a complex e-mail platform that allows access for students, faculty, and guests — all safely restricted to their own silos for security — and recently added a sophisticated spam filter for the system. The company also constructed a Cisco wireless network across campus, one of the most challenging installations at the seminary. "The campus is historic, so there is a physical challenge to many of these installations," explains Schwartz. For example, to avoid damaging

buildings with thick stone and plaster walls dating back to before the Civil War, AllSector used existing underground tunnels beneath the campus to run wiring. Those same heavy-duty structures created a different challenge when it came to wireless. A few years ago, the construction of the seminary's Desmond Tutu Center, a recent renovation project that turned three 19th-century Gothic buildings into a multifunction conference center, brought wireless to the forefront since the seminary needed to provide wireless access to the center. Schwartz says the answer to providing reliable wireless was simply hands-on evaluation. "Our staff walked the campus with wireless access points and laptops in hand and tested each area. We did our own version of 'can you hear me now?'"

Outsource IT To Get More From Your Budget

Keating says she would never have been able to move the seminary forward to its current technology environment without support from AllSector, both in terms of expertise and a strong partnership that goes beyond individual projects. "We started thinking our file server was the problem, but then within a year, we drew up a good plan with AllSector that went far beyond that. Every time we'd hit a snag, we would sit down and discuss what we needed today and what we would need in five years." That step-by-step construction of a technology infrastructure at the seminary means AllSector has a deep understanding of the campus. "I get the best of both worlds. I stay in budget with a small staff, but in reality I have this larger staff at my disposal, and it lets me use my budget in better ways." Keating says one unexpected benefit of her partnership with AllSector has been education. "I knew computers and educational technology, but regarding the actual day-to-day running of IT infrastructure, I was a bit clueless," she explains. "There was a tremendous advantage to having AllSector come in and teach me what I needed to know." Keating adds the seminary would not have made such strides without an expert partner, not only in terms of her growth as an IT manager but also in terms of long-term investment in technology. "IT is about things that blow up and getting them fixed in a timely manner," she says. "If your IT department just crumbles, you don't get much support. But when you get problems fixed and develop a reputation in-house for doing so, you do get that support internally. Plus, AllSector works with us and understands that while we have resources, we also operate economically, so we don't need cannon-sized solutions for peashooter-sized problems. That is important for any partner to understand." ■



Client Anne Keating shows off the end result of eight years of work with VAR partner AllSector.