

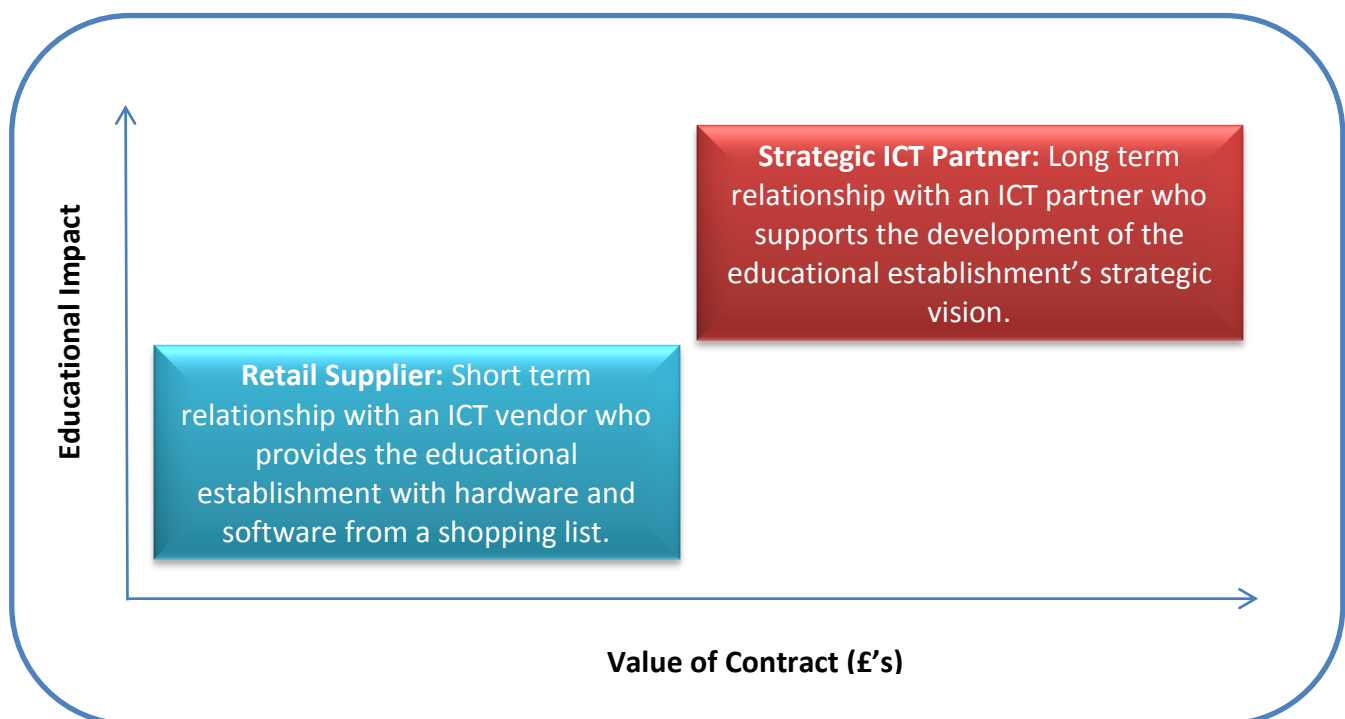
The Role of the ICT Partner

The evolving role of ICT companies in the education sector

What is the role of companies that provide ICT services to the education sector? Do schools expect no more than hardware, software and networked services from them or do educational establishments expect ICT companies to become active participants in designing, shaping and delivering education services fit for the 21st century?

The diagram shown below describes two broad relationships between ICT suppliers and schools. An educational establishment's relationship with an ICT supplier at a 'retail supplier' level represents a very simple client-supplier relationship. The school draws up a list of requirements and the preferred ICT contractor supplies, installs and commissions the hardware and services within an agreed timeframe and then steps away from the school until they are called upon again.

The school's relationship with a 'strategic ICT partner' represents a more complex client-supplier relationship. In this instance the school recognises the breadth and depth of the supplier's ICT catalogue but more importantly the educational establishment acknowledges the value of establishing a long-term strategic relationship with the ICT supplier. Here the ICT supplier plays an active and participative role when supporting the development of the school's curriculum, thereby enabling ICT to have a positive educational impact on the school.



If you examine the broad range of ICT services required by an educational establishment you will soon conclude that no single ICT supplier has the resources in-house to fulfil the institution's requirements. ICT suppliers remedy this through their supply chain. Their supply chain partners typically specialise in key services such as delivering staff training, hosting learning platform services or providing cashless catering solutions to the education sector. The ICT supplier strategically manages the relationship with its supply chain and operationally manages the delivery of agreed ICT services to the school. Many ICT companies that provide services to the

education sector have preferred to keep the number of links in their supply chain small, but this will no longer be possible if it is to fulfil the role of the strategic ICT partner across many schools.

Ultimately, the responsibility for raising standards in a school rests with its Head Teacher and its governing body. However, is there a role for the ICT supplier in supporting the school to raise standards in teaching and learning? The answer to this depends on whether the school adopts a retail supplier or a strategic partner relationship with its ICT supplier. The former removes any role for the ICT supplier in raising standards whilst the latter actively encourages and fosters a participative role for the ICT supplier.

The sharing of resources, risks and benefits are all characteristics associated with a strong partnership between the digitally advantaged school and ICT supplier. It is only by developing these new organisational partnerships that ICT suppliers can hope to make a positive impact on the education sector.

Many ICT companies ask me 'Why should they engage with the education sector in this manner? What is their commercial imperative?' My response is simple. By supporting the development of the new and emerging digital curriculum schools will require richer ICT environments to enable them to deliver the curriculum of the 21st century. There is a commercial incentive for ICT companies to engage with schools at a more strategic level. This level of partnership benefits both parties but more importantly it provides learners with a learning environment that is progressive and outward looking.

Schools and ICT suppliers work best when they recognise the value of working in a broad partnership with one another and where there is a real sense of ownership in the partnership to which they belong to. Successful ICT partnerships operate at all levels; be it strategic or if it is project driven.

ICT companies that service the education sector need to go beyond providing discrete hardware, software and networked services. They need to go beyond designing and delivering ICT solutions to schools. The successful ICT companies will be the ones that establish new organisational partnerships with schools where they share resources, risks and rewards of their endeavours. They are the companies that promote and establish a culture of innovation and who recognise the power of ICT to empower learners so that they can become active participants in the knowledge economy. These partnerships will characterise the new model for delivering ICT services across the education sector.

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