

The Paradox of Choice

The American psychologist Barry Schwartz¹ coined the phrase 'The Paradox of Choice'. He stated that we can reduce our overall level of anxiety if we reduce or limit the level of choice we face. But in the summer of 2012 we are witnessing an explosion of hardware and software platform choices, which in the words of Schwartz, is resulting in anxious times for countless schools across the globe.

"How on earth do I choose between hardware devices or between software platforms?" These questions were a lot easier to answer when the level of choice was limited but the degree and complexity of choice is beginning to perplex and baffle IT Managers and Business Managers within the education sector.



If the CEO's of Microsoft, Apple and Google were shop keepers there is plenty of evidence to suggest that they have worked hard to fill their shop windows with an array of attractive and eye catching products and services, all ready to appeal to passers-by and to the consumer market at large.

So what choices do consumers within the education sector face? Firstly, it is important to note that the hardware and software industries are aligning and converging. For instance, if a school decides to purchase an iPad the establishment is on the whole tied to Apple's software platform and services associated with that device. Similarly if a school chooses to select a Chromebox it is tied to Google's software and service platform. Secondly, the advent of Windows 8 this autumn will bring about an array of hardware devices from desktops to tablets. And thirdly, consumers within the education sector will see a rapid rise in the number of cloud based services offered to them.

When reflecting on Schwartz's paradox, it is easy to understand that there is a danger that IT consumption patterns across the education sector are increasingly seen as being based upon the desires, whims and pressures facing IT Managers and Business Managers and not simply upon meeting the needs and requirements of teachers and students within their educational establishments.

Schwartz is not an IT professional but his advice on how consumers make choices can help IT Managers and Business Managers in the education sector make informed IT spending decisions. He describes that good decisions are based on the following principles:

1. Figure out your goal or goals
2. Evaluate the importance of each goal
3. Set out your available options
4. Evaluate how likely each of the options is to meet your goals
5. Pick the winning option and later ...
6. Modify goals as a consequence of choices made

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