

Post University gets higher ed continuity and a remote work platform with Citrix

One day, legacy technology was an issue. The next, a new Citrix platform for remote work was in place. The IT team was ready – without even knowing COVID-19 was coming

Ten years is the equivalent of several lifetimes in the technology arena. Now, in today's volatile global climate, even ten days can drive a world of change. For Post University – founded in 1890 and situated in close proximity to the likes of traditional institutions such as Yale University and Trinity College – 11 decades has meant lots of operational and management changes.

More recently, it's meant changing technology. Dave Aldarondo, manager of network services, has been there for one of those decades and has managed many initiatives for this, Connecticut's first online university. One of his team's most recent and perhaps most impactful projects was completed overnight!

The employee experience improved with the transition from VMware to Citrix

Post University was the first higher education learning institution in Connecticut to offer online programs for students. The vintage 2006 early online environment was based on VMware technology. "Managing the legacy VMware environment became really problematic," Aldarondo notes. "Optimization for Microsoft Windows 10 was nonexistent, and the technology was costly. After years of using VMware, a change in university management, and a careful review of other options, we chose to replace VMware with Citrix."

When the team made this decision, it considered the fact that Citrix Cloud would soon be released. The IT professionals really liked the idea of shifting the responsibility of the management plane off university IT staff, especially given the size of the team.



Industry
Education

Location
USA

Citrix products

- Citrix ADC
- Citrix Virtual Apps and Desktops

Key Benefits

- Citrix Virtual Apps and Desktops delivers secure remote access to applications and desktops
- Citrix ADCs provide load balancing, analytical capabilities, and access to the university website
- Citrix Cloud, Citrix Workspace, and Citrix SD-WAN will be implemented at a later date

Small teams need really big partnerships

An IT team of only three people supports faculty, staff, and on-campus and online populations at Post. “Trusted partners bring us over that resources gap, and we use our partners very strategically. For example, one of them does password reset-level support for us,” Aldarondo notes. “Our trusted advisors from CPP teamed with us to deploy the versatile Citrix platform that eventually will serve the needs of employee, faculty, and student populations,” he summarizes.

The Post University IT team empowered employees – literally overnight

The first phase of the Citrix environment went live in late 2018. “Once we implemented Citrix, we never looked back,” Aldarondo declares. “We onboarded 450 Enrollment Center Associates – admissions counselors, advisors, financial aid reps, and all of the support personnel that enable students to succeed in arranging coursework. All of that is running very well on the Citrix platform today,” he adds.

Aldarondo emphasizes two more key points about the implementation:

- The IT team stood up the environment overnight, opening the 450-seat Enrollment Center in downtown Waterbury, Connecticut. At the same time, the IT group also completed a Windows 10 upgrade. In one night, IT transitioned all of the associates over to the new environment. The next day, staff members walked in and began using a brand-new Citrix operating system for the first time
- The transition meant that employees and faculty members, for that matter, immediately gained the capability to work remotely – from home, or literally from anywhere

The plan was to gain experience with the new environment before adding Citrix Cloud to the mix. Now that the IT team is experienced with the platform, the strategy is to move provisioning services and the desktop delivery controllers onto Citrix Cloud mid-year when the university’s new fiscal year begins. After that, only the desktop workloads will be managed on-premises.

Well-prepared employees and IT professionals seamlessly transitioned home

When the coronavirus pandemic reached epic and global proportions, the university ultimately sent all of its already-onboarded Enrollment Center staff members home. Both the IT team and users were completely prepared and already familiar with using the new solution thanks to the Citrix and Windows 10 transition that had already taken place.

“We’ve seen even more growth and productivity now that workers have gone home. They have all their tools in front of them, so they can simply plug in headsets and go,” Aldarondo exclaims. “They make calls, take calls, work with students, access company resources, help students in the classroom, and much more, all from the Citrix platform.”

“ As we were scaling up the employee environment, we watched the screen and ADCs enabled us to see our business light up in real time! It was like being at a space launch!”

Dave Aldarondo
Manager of Network Services
Post University

Fewer service tickets equals a better employee experience

“Before we made the transition, users were very vocal about the problems they experienced with the legacy VMware environment,” Aldarondo points out. In the past, when the IT team introduced new solutions, help desk professionals typically experienced an increase in calls. “There will always be a percentage of the user population that is resistant to change,” he says.

“When we implemented Citrix, however, we received little to no negative feedback. The number of service calls decreased significantly. Users thought that the platform felt natural, that it was highly available, and that it performed well.”

Over the next 12 months, the team will continue its Citrix roll-out – this time concentrating on online students. Currently, students use Citrix in labs and classrooms. “Despite the fact that Citrix usage isn’t yet at scale with students, those who have used it have noted that performance is much better than it was with the legacy system,” Aldarondo adds. “Our IT team also has found that managing the Citrix environment is much easier than overseeing the VMware technology.”

Students can pick the delivery method that makes them happy

Today, Post University has two populations of students whose numbers vary with each new term.

Roughly 1,000 traditional main campus students live on-site, go to the dining halls, visit the student center, and attend physical classroom activities. Between 13,000 to 14,000 people operate 100% online and take all classes on a variety of devices.

While Citrix technology primarily supports staff now, the ‘at scale’ phase for students is coming soon. Right now, Citrix is available and being used by students only in on-site classrooms and labs. As the status approaches at scale, one of the other big challenges that the Post University IT team faces is a concern that many other online higher education entities grapple with too. It is crucial to support the business needs of online students. These are things that typically would be handled by a visit to the registrar’s office or the bursar’s office. It is part of the job to build a support mechanism into the online environment so that students’ problems can be addressed remotely. Ultimately, Citrix technology will provide students with just that.

The IT team also is strategizing with other issues as well, for example, how it will build virtual labs for students that will enable them to access common course tools. “Our IT team really wants to push the envelope with distance learning,” says Aldarondo. “We were having these discussions prior to the pandemic, but finding viable answers has become even more important now.”

The Citrix stack will continue to grow

The team envisions that a number of Citrix products and solutions ultimately will comprise the Post University technology stack. Right now, [Citrix Virtual Apps and Desktops](#) and [Citrix App Delivery Controllers \(ADCs\)](#) are implemented. The vision for the next 12 months includes the addition of Citrix Cloud, [Citrix Workspace](#) and its intelligent capabilities, and [Citrix SD-WAN](#).

Citrix ADC made connections light up – literally

In the Post IT environment, one of the things Citrix ADCs (VPX appliances) are used for is load balancing applications. In addition, Citrix ADCs securely deliver remote access to virtual apps and desktops that currently are hosted on-premises at the university.

According to Dave Aldarondo, though, there's more: "Being able to view performance and network performance metrics in the desktop delivery controllers – without risking visibility into users' home networks was a game changer," he declares. "As we were scaling up the employee environment, we watched the screen and ADCs enabled us to see our business light up in real time! It was like being at a space launch!" he exclaims. "We could see the engagement; and easily determine where and when issues occurred."

Aldarondo summarizes the transformation project this way: "This whole initiative has been really rewarding. We can't wait to share what we've learned with other higher ed entities. We may have very traditional roots, but we also have a bright future as a catalyst for change in online program strategies."

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