

A vital cog in a high performance machine: world class IT for the English Institute of Sport



Employing 250 staff from 15 High Performance Centres across the UK and with practitioners often working overseas, the English Institute of Sport (EIS) delivers high quality sport science and medical support to elite athletes. “Our focus is on improving performance and achieving medal success on the world stage,” says Mark Richards, Head of Information Systems.

Overview

Since EIS was created, BT Engage IT has provided a complete outsourced IT and communications infrastructure, designed to help the organisation achieve its vision

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‘to be the world-leading provider of performance-impacting sport science and medicine within elite sport’. This activity assumed even greater importance

following the UK’s successful bid for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games. “We have to provide 24/7 access to IT and communications to staff all over the world, often in very intense and demanding situations, from athletes indoor in gyms, outside on the water or

in the snow to people abroad at training camps, in high altitude locations, and so on,” Richards says. “Wherever athletes perform, our practitioners are there. This is about ensuring essential technology is available anywhere and anytime. It’s not a nine-to-five job.”

The EIS supports 1,700 elite athletes in 50 sports, delivering 4,000 hours of sport science and medicine every week. Richards says a key challenge is ensuring everyone who needs access to information has it. “Having the right technology supported by good communications is crucial to what we do. And our people use a variety of techniques and technologies, in different disciplines, from nutritionists with specific software to produce diet plans to performance analysts who need high-spec laptops to run high-speed HD videos of athletes. And few practitioners claim to be IT experts, so provision must be simple and reliable as well as flexible. We can’t afford for our IT service to break down.” This diversity must be catered for – which is where BT Engage IT came in.

Solution

In 2001, armed with a set of requirements that included significant ‘second-guessing’ of future needs, EIS went through a full public procurement process for ICT. The preferred supplier was BT Engage IT. “It was the best solution, then and now,” Richards says. “It’s stood the test of time.”

He believes BT Engage IT doesn’t take the relationship for granted. When the first five-year contract ended, EIS went out to tender again. “We tested the market, and BT Engage IT won again. They share our values – innovation, for example, in always keeping one step ahead of the competition. There are organisations comparable to BT Engage IT who could do a similar job but you wouldn’t have that relationship. We feel we matter to BT Engage IT. I think that would be different if we were dealing with another provider.”

The fully managed service includes a secure data centre, wide area network to nine major regional sites plus broadband and wireless connectivity for satellite locations, 24/7 Service Desk support for users, remote monitoring and management, hardware break/fix, and change management activity, which can include BT Engage IT co-ordinating third parties. Richards continues, "With EIS staff moving around so much, they can just plug-in their laptop at any site and it works in exactly the same way." Supporting demands for flexibility, EIS practitioners are device independent, utilising Citrix remote access. "You don't even need your EIS laptop: you can use any computer with web access and work exactly as you would in the office with all your data, line-of-business applications, Microsoft SharePoint, and so on." Richards says collaborative working with BT Engage IT's Service Delivery Team brings important advantages. "We've worked with the same team for years, and they're as enthusiastic today as in the beginning. And the Service Delivery Manager anticipates so many issues before they become problems - he is very good at getting involved in projects and steering you towards the right solution when you have various choices. I really like the way the team works."

Why BT Engage IT?

"BT Engage IT built our solution and continues to manage it," Richards adds. "I tend not to hear much about it. BT Engage IT takes all the user support issues from me, so I can instead concentrate on my job, managing the estate and on more strategic projects. BT Engage IT really helps us keep on top of our infrastructure, and is proactive too." Recent innovations include mobile phone tethering to use devices as '3G sticks', yet another way

to access the core infrastructure, along with virtualisation of servers to further support EIS' green agenda, and the 'EIS Connect' collaboration portal based on a Microsoft SharePoint upgrade.

Richards adds, "We can rely on BT Engage IT to provide the service we need. We have to keep our systems running, and BT Engage IT does that. So I have that peace of mind." Given BT Engage IT is such an important 'cog' in the machine, helping EIS drive high performance, he says it's a natural conclusion that "BT Engage IT is also having a direct impact on elite athletes and what they achieve. The spirit of our contract is one of partnership rather than traditional client/supplier. When they see athletes winning on TV, the people from BT Engage IT should know they've played a part in that success, and share in that sense of pride. For me personally, I have ultimate responsibility for our IT, so it has to work - and I couldn't do my job without BT Engage IT. I can focus instead on longer-term strategic work, and leave the day-to-day to them. I'm confident BT Engage IT is on top of things, and in many cases can manage incidents better than I could."

He says this relationship will be even more important during the three months of intense activity athletes and EIS staff will encounter in 2012. "That will mean focusing again on resilience and reliability, and the service levels BT Engage IT can provide during the games - for example, coping with traffic in London. It won't exactly be 'business-as-usual' but I'm confident we will have it all sorted out. After the games our funding changes in 2013, and we'll have to adapt. But I'm also confident we can continue working with BT Engage IT through those changes."

"BT Engage IT is an important part of our multi-disciplinary team - and, as such, is critical to enabling us to deliver performance impacting support to our athletes. When you see athletes on the medals podium, there's a big team of EIS people behind them, and a big support team behind EIS - which includes BT Engage IT."

Mark Richards, Head of Information Systems, English Institute of Sport

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