

How a timely tech upgrade from soma helped ACE Community Colleges overcome pandemics and floods

ACE
COMMUNITY
COLLEGES

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Introducing ACE Community Colleges

Established in 1972, the not-for-profit Adult Continuing Education (ACE) network of community colleges has continuously offered quality training and education for adults looking to further their careers, change careers, or simply re-enter the workforce. They strive to deliver accredited qualifications and thorough vocational training. Their approach to education is simple: be the best person you can be, no matter what it is you do. As a result of this mission, 94% of their students report a significant, positive outcome related to their education at ACE.

ACE campuses can be found in Queensland at Southport and Burleigh Waters, and in NSW at Lismore and Murwillumbah. According to ACE, with four campuses and smaller classes, "More time and attention is given to the individual student, and learning is



At our core we believe in the life changing significance of choice, that everyone can achieve, that we each learn differently; and that there are many powerful alternative pathways to career development. Your success is what we care about.

KERRY JOHNSON,
PRINCIPAL OF ACE COMMUNITY COLLEGES



tailored to their needs.” More time and attention also means each student has access to a structured support environment. In short, for adults looking to further their education – for any reason – ACE Colleges strive to offer an incredibly supportive and attentive place to study and learn.

They also work closely with indigenous groups: “We do a lot of work in indigenous communities around the North Coast, which is where we’re based,” Kerry Johnson, Principal of ACE Colleges remarks. This involvement further spreads the message of ACE College’s quality programs, enabling them to reach and assist thousands of students each year.

As we will see in the next chapter, however, achieving this goal has not been without its challenges. Floods, COVID, a lack of IT support, and outdated technology pushed the college’s network infrastructure to the limit, creating a need for a new and innovative approach to technology. They needed a technological shift, a need that soma was more than ready to handle.

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The Initial Situation

ACE Community Colleges has faced several adverse situations in the past five years. One of the more significant events happened in 2017 with the Lismore Flood Disaster, we will be looking at that specific issue in Chapter 4. For now, we will take a look at how COVID affected their operations.

When lockdowns happened and borders closed, ACE found themselves – as did many companies – in the tough position of transforming from a cross-state organisation to learning how to operate within closed borders. Particularly when those lockdowns came with only a moment's notice.

“It's been difficult the last two years because of COVID,” Kerry Johnson, Principal at ACE Community Colleges, remarks. “We'd get told at five o'clock in the afternoon that at six o'clock that night, we're going to lock down for a week.”

It's difficult to run a business with so much stopping and starting, and so little preparation time. However, even before COVID, smoothly running the organisation across borders created problems.

Outdated software and equipment made working between campuses very difficult. For example, any time a staff member needed to update files between campuses, they would leverage a USB drive to manually update everything once they arrived at the other campus. Add to that security issues, a lack of internal IT support, and the fact that they were still largely paper-based, and ACE found themselves fighting some fairly difficult uphill battles.

They needed some changes, and they needed them quickly. Fortunately for them, soma was ready.



We used to rely on internal IT support within the colleges but we outgrew it. We had regular issues with corrupted emails and situations where staff could access data that should have been restricted.

ERIN HUTCHINSON,
OPERATIONS MANAGER AT
ACE COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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Enter soma

They reached out to soma, who stepped in and helped them upgrade, harden their systems, and – overall – made their operations more efficient and secure. soma hit the ground running, helping to stabilise software and move their operations online. Kerry Johnson, reflecting on the fact that they were, once upon a time, using USBs to update files, adds, “Once we made the move to soma that all changed because our work is now in the cloud and it’s just been made so much easier.”

That move was extremely beneficial because, by the time COVID hit and borders closed, they were no longer having to run USB drives interstate. With everything in the cloud, business operations were impacted very little.

Like any new technology, however, transitioning can be rough. Fortunately, with the help of soma, ACE were able to really invest in learning management, allowing the staff to adjust quickly and easily to the new technology. Overall, the staff’s – and soma’s – flexibility shaped their response to problems that they did not even know were coming.

For Erin Hutchinson, Operations Manager at ACE, the most significant aspect of working with soma has been the support:



The amount of times that I’ve picked up the phone and gone, ‘I need something to happen instantly,’ because I’ve had no warning myself and they [soma] just make it happen, which is fantastic. They help us out as quickly and effectively as possible. We know we can pick up the phone and there will be someone ready to help on the other end.”



We used to take a USB stick up to Burleigh every time we went. People would have to change all their files over to the latest ones directly causing multiple file versions and losing data. [But] once we made the move to soma, that all changed because all of our work is now in the cloud and it's just been made so much easier.

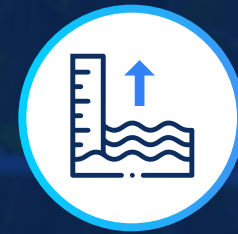
KERRY JOHNSON,
PRINCIPAL OF ACE COMMUNITY COLLEGES



2017 LISMORE FLOODS



31 March 2017 -
the Lismore CBD area
of New South Wales
flooded



Waters
reached nearly
12 metres high



The flood
impacted 68% of
businesses



The flood caused
nearly \$40 million
in damage



Though 20,000 people
were evacuated in
time, there were still
seven fatalities



The flood came on so quickly and it damaged the entire town including our facilities.

ERIN HUTCHINSON, OPERATIONS MANAGER AT ACE COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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Lismore Flood Disaster

It is no secret that Lismore and the surrounding areas are prone to flooding. In fact, the area has seen several devastating floods over the years (most notably in 1954 and 1974). However, in 2017, the people of Lismore experienced the worst flood they had ever seen, affecting thousands of people and businesses. ACE, unfortunately, was one of them.

Everything admin-related was located on the ground floor of the building, and they lost all of their paperwork: financial records, historical documents, and student records. “We lost everything,” Kerry Johnson explained. It could have been worse, though, and both Erin and Kerry are grateful for several factors.

First, the organisation had already moved away from desktops and towers, and had begun leveraging laptops. “It was a matter of grabbing the laptops and chucking them upstairs,” Erin remarked. Even though the flood happened on a Friday and Saturday, by that Tuesday, everyone was upstairs, with their computers up and running.

Secondly, ACE had already begun working with soma, and though they lost their hardcopies, everything had already been backed up on the cloud. “By that stage, we’d actually moved over to housing all of our stuff in the cloud with soma managing it,” Kerry explained. Both women agree that it was a difficult time for the college, but without soma, it could have been devastating.





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Countering COVID's Impact

We have already seen the impact that COVID had on ACE and other organisations, particularly in regards to border closings. When you are used to moving from location to location in a business, it can be very difficult to suddenly find yourself unable to do so, but as we've also seen, in working with soma, ACE moved everything to the cloud, allowing anyone on any campus to access whatever materials they needed, no matter where the information was housed. This, Erin believes, may have saved the organisation.

"When COVID hit last year, we were already doing everything online, so we didn't have to make too many changes," Erin explained. While they did not have to modify how they were storing

and retrieving information, they did still have to adjust to working from an almost 100% remote position, and this took some training with quite a learning curve.

ACE invested heavily in their training and learning management systems, working with soma to learn new software and protocols for working remotely. The goal was to help remediate the potential setbacks created by border closings. The hard work paid off, and thankfully, ACE's staff were up to the challenge. Erin noted,

"Our staff have been quite wonderful in taking on the challenges. They've been quite flexible and quite understanding."

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Outcomes

When ACE Community Colleges wanted to upgrade their technology, they turned to a name they trusted: soma. soma has helped them move all of their information to the cloud, updated their software, and offered them the support they need to continue operating smoothly and efficiently.

It was a good thing too. By 2017, the Lismore area experienced terrible flooding, which destroyed their first-floor offices and all of their paperwork. Every hard copy of every student record, all the financial records, everything was gone. Thanks to the work of soma, however, all of those records were available online, and so while the paper may have been destroyed, their work was not.

Then, in 2020, COVID hit. Borders closed, making it difficult to work between states, a problem that would have been almost insurmountable had ACE still been operating with their old tech and IT support. However, with their move to the cloud, there was no more driving USBs across borders to update files. Now, people could update

files and collaborate on projects in real time, regardless of distance. Once more, soma helped prevent what could have been a disaster.

The ACE Colleges team have found soma to be a crucial asset in enabling them to run their operations. Their continual and reliable support, in particular, is an invaluable resource.

“I know that I can rely on soma and can always contact one of the techs for support and advice. It doesn't matter what is going on in our business, they are always ready to help.”



“

We've been around since the 70s and we've had two and a half thousand students each year, doing various courses with us. We are also involved in a lot of different community projects which keeps things interesting and soma has helped us maintain this growth and success, even through incredibly difficult times.

KERRY JOHNSON,
PRINCIPAL OF ACE COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Get in touch with soma today to
arrange a free consultation and quote.

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