Founded in 2015, Learn Forward is a London-based startup set up to bring digital educational content to teachers. The company has developed the technology to power a new generation of digital textbooks, which students in three European countries use daily. In 2017, it launched Hypersay, a new tool for teachers, lecturers, and conference speakers to enhance PowerPoint files and engage audiences using real-time interactions. Hypersay's 10,000+ users come from a wide range of schools, colleges and higher-ed institutions in more than 100 countries, including: Eton College, University College London, University of Bolton, University of Cambridge, University of Southern Mississippi, and more.
Engaging audiences

Have you ever sat through a presentation where you felt too nervous to ask questions? Or where your attention drifted, and you missed important information? Learn Forward wanted to help speakers engage with audiences more effectively, from the classroom to the boardroom, so that no-one gets left behind.

Cristian Dinu, Co-founder and Technical Leader at Learn Forward, takes up the story: “At school, when I was confused about something, I always hesitated to ask questions because I felt like I was the only one who didn’t understand. This meant I struggled a lot, because building knowledge is like building a house—you can’t do it on an unfinished foundation, just like you can’t get to grips with complex mathematics unless you understand the basics.

“These issues extend into our professional lives. For example, a salesperson might try to sell me a product that would be very useful for my company—but if I don’t ask questions and get my concerns addressed during the presentation, I won’t buy it, which means both of us lose.

“The challenge runs both ways—just as audiences want to receive information, presenters want to feel confident, and to know that they are getting their message across effectively.”

Learn Forward saw an opportunity to harness technology to take presentations to the next level, supporting both presenters and their audiences.

Paul Balogh, Co-founder and CEO at Learn Forward, continues: “Our mission is about enabling communication between a presenter and each and every person in the audience, in real time. We wanted to create a solution that enhanced presentations through interactive additions. These include quizzes to help hold audience attention, and functionality for audiences to give real-time feedback and ask questions digitally.

“However, going digital has its challenges—there’s nothing worse than giving a presentation and running into technical issues! Security is also a major concern, with the application holding valuable client data. We knew that to digitize presentations successfully, we needed to build our solution on a reliable, scalable, and highly secure platform.”

Developing the solution

Learn Forward approached managed services provider and systems integrator Cognition Foundry for the right technology on which to build its new solution.

Cognition Foundry was formed in 2016 by CEO Ron Argent, with the intent to work with startups to get them access to technology that is used by large institutions and enterprises. In a sense, to “democratize IT”.

“Cognition Foundry is a partner, not just a technology provider,” notes Paul Balogh. “We decided to use their private cloud, powered by IBM LinuxONE, as the foundation for our solution. As an enterprise server, LinuxONE offered the reliability, scalability and security we needed to successfully see our solution through to final delivery. We were also impressed by how easy LinuxONE is to use—the environment feels very familiar, so we could get to work straight away.”

Cristian Dinu adds: “We didn’t want technical issues to get in the way of our customers’ presentations, so availability was a major concern for us. Additionally, because our application gathers real-time and post-event feedback about audience engagement, we needed a platform that could process large quantities of data. LinuxONE can handle vast amounts of traffic and backs up regularly, so it gives us that essential server reliability.”

All startups face the challenge of adding new customers without the benefit of existing revenue streams. Paul Balogh describes the ambivalence this causes a CEO: “You enjoy growth, which is fantastic, but this also raises costs, which is less fantastic. You hope to cross that bridge towards the point where you have revenue coming in, which will cover the costs.”

So how does a young startup survive its own success? Paul Balogh’s answer is partnering: “When you are in between these two worlds, you need to have people and partners that will take you across this bridge. Cognition Foundry is essentially helping to fill this gap, the bridge between growth and revenue.”

Rather than offer funding which could dilute or indebt Learn Forward, Cognition Foundry uses the unique architecture of IBM LinuxONE to keep the costs of growing down while revenues increase.

Ron Argent explains: “To me, LinuxONE is a perfect choice, offering a simple way to scale up and expand, which can contain the cost dramatically in some cases. LinuxONE scales vertically so it doesn’t have the same complexity as scaling out in a horizontal manner, which is typical of many of the commodity-based technologies. A startup can continue to grow without experiencing enormous cost spikes, which could otherwise arise in areas they just didn’t consider when they started their journey.”
Taking presentations to the next level

Backed by LinuxONE and the Cognition Foundry team, Learn Forward has successfully developed Hypersay, a solution that enables users to turn their PowerPoint files into engaging presentations that feature real-time interactions with audiences.

Paul Balogh elaborates: "Hypersay is very simple to use. The speaker, for example a teacher, can drag and drop their PowerPoint file into Hypersay on our website. They can then add interactive elements to the slides, such as questions, polls, videos, and extra content, to increase audience participation and engagement.

“They also receive the code for a live session to share with the audience. The students or audience members can enter this code into their phones and connect to the teacher’s slides in real time—they can take notes, ask questions, provide feedback, and up-vote and down-vote colleagues’ questions, all through their mobile devices.”

“LinuxONE has enabled us to reach our goal of harnessing technology to really connect presenters with their audiences,” comments Cristian Dinu.

“Now, presenters have a host of tools at their disposal to make their presentations more interactive and engaging, so that they convey their message more effectively. Speakers also benefit from real-time and post-event audience feedback, enabling them to improve future presentations. Thanks to the reliability of LinuxONE, they never need to worry about technical issues getting in the way of a smooth presentation.”

Paul Balogh continues: “On the other side of the podium, Hypersay empowers each and every audience member to participate and ask questions, so no-one gets left behind. Audiences also feel more engaged, encouraging effective learning and knowledge transfer.

“For example, Eton College ran a survey with their students after using this technology, and found that the students were much more eager to take notes, as they preferred typing to using pen and paper.”
The application also has a function allowing participants to reward presenters by sending them ‘hearts’. As an example, our data showed that on a given day students had rewarded teachers a total of 5,500 hearts in 24 hours, which is a very simple and quick measure of engagement.

By building Hypersay to run on LinuxONE, Learn Forward has benefited from the platform’s flexibility, scalability, reliability, security, and cost-effectiveness.

Ron Argent notes, “LinuxONE offers the flexibility of open-source technology, a key factor for startups. The ability to quickly move code from one platform to another to help them get their product to market, at a cost that’s affordable, is absolutely paramount.

“Furthermore, LinuxONE gives startups the ability to scale vertically without the time and expense of having to add new machines, configure new devices, create new VPNs, and so on, which is of huge value. When cost becomes excessive, startups tend to spend more time thinking about how to control that cost than focusing on their core product. The ability to scale up easily with LinuxONE gives Learn Forward the chance to grow, while mitigating the costs associated with that growth, which is crucial to its success.”

Cristian Dinu adds: “The security offered by LinuxONE is key. Our customers can feel confident that their data is safe at all times.”

Paul Balogh concludes: “LinuxONE is a platform of the past, present, and future—it’s based on a design that has withstood the test of time, and the engineering is world-leading and constantly developing. To have a platform that has already lasted decades, and that is going to last for years more into the future, is a very comforting feeling.

“It gives us confidence that we’re using a platform that’s going to continue to provide the reliability and scalability we need—so everyone from the boardroom to the classroom can benefit from more engaging, empowering presentations with Hypersay.”

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