

Novaskill transitions to remote learning operations with soma

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Introducing Novaskill

Novaskill is a Non Profit Organisation, specialising in Group Training and Vocational Education. Novaskill has helped local individuals reach their full potential for over forty years by providing high-quality training, employment, and community services. Their goal is to improve people's lives and enrich communities.

Novaskill, first named Hunter Group Apprentice, began in the early 1980s after an economic downturn impacted the Hunter region. Later, they transformed into Hunter Group Training to ensure that young local apprentices would have a way to continue their trade training even without employment.

As explained by Eisell Gifford, senior ICT officer at Novaskill:

"We have been around for over 40 years. Launching initially as a group training provider, helping apprentices get the necessary skills to complete their qualifications, we later expanded into providing nationally recognised training as a registered training organisation. Fast forward to today we offer a wide variety of tailored training solutions for students, business and employment opportunities for hundreds of apprentices and trainees."

As an industry leading Registered Training Organisation as well as a Group Training Organisation, we strive to offer the best quality training and services to our students, trainees, apprentices and host employers. For over 40 years, our goal has been to support our local communities by enriching people's lives.

SARAH JOHNSON
ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER OF NOVASKILL



While they started small, Novaskill became one of Australia's longest operating group training companies. After becoming a Registered Training Organisation, it trained students in various Vocational Education and Training Areas. Slowly, it expanded and continued to grow as it found its footing as an industry leader for both employers and employees alike.

As Sarah elaborated:

"Our footprint extends along the east coast of Australia. Currently consisting of nine sites, operating from our southernmost branch at Tuggerah, NSW up to the Gold Coast, QLD. With current plans to expand even further."

Novaskill's growth trajectory has truly been impressive. Currently, they have nine branches in Queensland and New South Wales.

Today, Novaskill is an accredited, nationally recognised organisation that caters to the needs of individual enterprises and industries as a whole.

Novaskill works closely with the community, as mentioned by Eisell:

"As a company we believe strongly in community outreach and engagement. We have a dedicated donations committee that contributes to local events and charities, we are a regular sponsor of a local football team in Ballina and are regularly involved in community events throughout the year."

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The Situation

Despite enjoying years of accomplishment as a leader in Workforce Education, Novaskill had to face their struggles when COVID-19 hit.

Sarah also felt the pandemic greatly affected how they operated. She gave an example of how students need to complete 120 hours of work. The pandemic caused companies to put up a lot of red tape, and students could not go into the industry and complete these hours. So, adjusting to these changes was a challenge Novaskill had to overcome.

Sarah elaborated:

“When COVID first hit, we were in the process of rolling out Microsoft Teams which fortunately was just good timing. We rolled it out and a week later, we’re all working from home. Traditionally, we hadn’t done too much work from home, a lot of our infrastructure is internal so it was a very big shift dynamically for our organisation.”

Besides the pandemic’s impact and the glaring need to go online, Novaskill was also facing other problems on the IT side of things.

Eisell mentioned:

“Our previous network infrastructure was becoming dated and was difficult to repair when something went wrong.”

In light of all this, Novaskill needed an experienced technological partner that they could trust to navigate the challenges and enable them to continue improving workplace education in their communities.



We really had to act quickly as the situation with the pandemic developed. It led us to a complete paradigm shift as a company, until that point we were predominantly office-based. But within only a few weeks we had moved almost all our staff to working from home.

EISELL GIFFORD
SENIOR ICT OFFICER AT NOVASKILL

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Enter soma

soma helped strengthen Novaskill's new network and fix the issues they faced with their previous network. When they first engaged soma, Eisell noted that they performed an audit on all of their systems and procedures. After that, they provided them with a comprehensive overview of what worked and what did not.

Sarah added that soma was initially a recommendation from Telstra, whom Novaskill also worked with. They started their working relationship with soma around mid-March, and the initial projects ran smoothly enough for them to trust soma with ongoing work. Sarah believes soma was integral in developing their comprehensive organisational roadmap, which they still leverage today.

As shared by Sarah:

"soma initially did a big audit for us, which was really beneficial and helped us build our roadmap. It helped us figure out where we needed to be and what areas we wanted to focus on as an organisation. Whether it was around the security side of things, infrastructure or Microsoft Teams Calling, soma highlighted which areas we needed to focus on to achieve our vision."

Eisell shared that he believes soma gained his trust through their reliability and efficiency whenever complicated problems or tech-related emergencies arose.

He touched on this matter further:

“ When it comes to external IT support, it's always the eleventh hour when we bring soma in and give them complex or well-tried problems. Usually, it's highly time-critical at that stage because once it's escalated past level one and level two support, we've exhausted everything that we can do, and we bring the problem to soma.”

soma has been really useful, and we engage them when we need them. We have brought them in for various significant projects to strengthen our network. They have flawlessly addressed the few issues we have experienced and allowed us to maintain operations throughout the network upgrade.



We now run a much smoother and cleaner network topology. And I can say quite comfortably that since the network upgrade was completed, we have avoided significant outages. So, soma has been a massive help.

EISELL GIFFORD, SENIOR ICT OFFICER AT NOVASKILL

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Countering COVID's Impact

COVID was an inescapable spectre that haunted every organisation across the planet in some way or another. When it came to Novaskill, Sarah explained that they employed software like Microsoft Teams and Skype to collaborate with different teams online throughout the pandemic. A key challenge was eliminating the phone desk in daily operations and focusing on functionalities for working offsite and still effectively answering calls.

The goal was to counter COVID's impact by introducing greater flexibility for Novaskill. Moreover, they focused on conducting more operations digitally.





It was fortunate timing on our management's behalf because we didn't know the extent of what the post-COVID world was going to look like. When planning strategically, we knew we needed to do something.

We knew we had to move quickly to ensure we could support our staff as much as possible, especially if we were to be thrown into a work from home arrangement. We needed to care for our staff in case they had compromised immune systems or they were living with elderly people and other similar concerns because we have a really large demographic of people that we work with.

SARAH JOHNSON,
ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER OF NOVASKILL

As shared by Eisell:

"We had been looking to explore what a network upgrade would look like for us, as well as looking to reduce costs and streamline our phone system."

Novaskill always wanted to adopt online platforms, and the pandemic greatly expedited the move. Quickly training the teachers to use virtual classrooms on Microsoft Teams remains a top priority.

Sarah also explained that they have traineeship roles throughout the company. While it is saddening to have some people leave after training, it also holds an opportunity to grow within the role and add value for their staff.

Novaskill took this opportunity with their senior ICT officer, Eisell, a prime example of this internal development. He worked his way up throughout the organisation and assumed the IT role after another person left the company just before COVID struck.

soma takes care of our problems big and small. During COVID, for example, I lost the internet at home, and soma did absolutely everything they could to help me. I had all sorts of trouble, and they went above and beyond to try and rectify that for us and help even though they don't specialise in home setups.



We've been able to call them for urgent tasks and they've been able to drop everything. They've done amazing work with Eisell where they had to get some branches back up and running because they lost power. soma spent late nights working to support the team and get the operations up and running so the rest of the company can work.

SARAH JOHNSON, ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER OF NOVASKILL



Outcomes

The trusted longstanding relationship between soma and Novaskill will continue with optimising and improvements always on the agenda for both organisations. The partnership has resulted in a steady stream of business outcomes and the strategic plan developed by soma has led to tangible business outcomes for Novaskill. One particular project which was crucially vital was the deployment of Microsoft Teams which enabled effective communication and collaboration in a suddenly remote technology reliant world.

In Sarah's words:

"I think it's really helped our online platform for our students as they can collaborate and work together. It enables us to have practical classrooms where the students might be at home, and our staff members might be at home or in the office. They've been able to facilitate training that way."

"It's certainly changed the way we train and the way we communicate internally. A lot of people are disconnected because they might live alone. They might not leave their house for a couple of days and they're able to communicate and get responses a lot quicker because they have Microsoft Teams available all the time."

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In 2022, we're going to go back to looking at our timetable for rolling out new projects, and I think the feature will be cloud-based. In future, we will be looking towards moving our on-prem Active Directory to a pure cloud-based solution.

We will be decommissioning on-prem servers now that we've got a pretty solid, cloud-based solution mapped out to us from soma. So, I think the focus will be decommissioning all equipment and replacing it when needed. Hopefully, we'll start up a bunch of new sites as well because Novaskill is always keen to expand and leverage our inroads into previously unclaimed areas of the business.

EISELL GIFFORD, SENIOR ICT OFFICER AT NOVASKILL

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What's Next?

For Novaskill, the journey to helping communities gain valuable qualifications and stable careers continues. As they strive to become fully cloud-based, they hope to embed greater flexibility in their operations and added value for their Australian customers. Together with soma, they hope to cultivate efficiency within the organisation.

Sarah noted:

"I think we've got a great relationship with soma and we enjoy working with them. We collaborate with them when we need to, and they work really well with Telstra and our Telstra support team. We all collaborate quite well. soma got us where we needed to be, and helped us set up

the strategic plan currently in place that we can build from and work towards. Their contribution to our strategic plan has been really valuable."

For those who plan to undertake a similar project, Sarah's advice is to clearly understand your company's end goal and listen to expert advice. She expressed that collaborating with a partner like soma might provide companies with valuable insights.

Eisell offered his advice by simply saying:

"It all comes down to the results. The proof is in the results. And from working with soma, the results are clear."



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today to arrange a
free consultation and quote.

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