Kiddie Academy chooses Microsoft to meet growth targets—and save $800,000

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Greg Goodwin, Vice President, Technology, Kiddie Academy

Kiddie Academy (www.kiddieacademy.com), a US educational childcare franchise, needs technology to support its rapid growth. After passing on several competitive options as too expensive, it adopted a range of Microsoft cloud services and Surface Pro tablets, creating an end-to-end solution for communicating and collaborating with franchisees, as well as managing CRM and key corporate workflows. The solution saves Kiddie Academy more than US$800,000 over five years and it delivers the scalability and security the company needs to keep growing.
Kiddie Academy offers a proprietary curriculum that focuses on social and emotional character education, and physical and cognitive outcomes aligned with state preschool learning standards. The Kiddie Academy Life Essentials® curriculum is a competitive advantage that has fueled the company’s growth over its 35 years as a childcare leader, with more than 170 academies in 23 states. The company expects to expand to more than 200 academies by the end of 2017.

**Technology must support growth—cost-effectively**

One of the people charged with turning that expectation into reality is Greg Goodwin, Vice President of Technology at Kiddie Academy. While others refine the curriculum, support franchise growth, and recruit franchisees, Goodwin’s role is to ensure that technology supports the company’s growth targets—and that it does so cost-effectively.

It hasn’t always been easy.

“When you grow quickly, the challenge is to scale up your technology without scaling up your costs,” Goodwin says. “And when you’re a franchisor, the challenge is to use technology to ensure consistent standards across the franchise system. We face both challenges.”

Training and communication with franchisees are primary ways to ensure consistent standards. To perform these functions, Kiddie Academy previously relied on a lightweight, franchise-specific CRM application along with manually tracked processes and what Goodwin calls “piles of paper and tons of spreadsheets, all having different sets of information. We relied heavily on decentralized information, and some things would fall through the cracks.”

Goodwin and his colleagues considered other options before deciding to partner with Microsoft. Those options would have addressed many of their needs—but at an unacceptable cost, especially as the company continued to grow. “With several well-known solutions, we faced a significant cost of entry on licensing, and an even higher cost of ongoing maintenance, since we’d have to license every corporate user and every franchise user,” he says. “It wasn’t practical for us.”

**The end-to-end solution**

To help it identify and implement a solution that would avoid these issues, Kiddie Academy turned to Microsoft cloud partner Slickdata. Together, they built a custom solution—called Kiddie Academy Resources, or KARES for short—that includes portals, blogging, forums for collaboration, customer relationship management, training videos, a knowledge base of best practices, and its Life Essentials curriculum. The solution uses [Microsoft Dynamics 365](https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/dynamics/365).

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**Customer Profile:**
For more than 35 years, Kiddie Academy ([www.kiddieacademy.com](http://www.kiddieacademy.com)) has been a leader in educational childcare. It has more than 170 academies located in 23 states, with many more in development.

**Partner Profile:** Slickdata ([www.slickdata.com](http://www.slickdata.com)) is a Microsoft Cloud Stack (Microsoft Dynamics 365, Office 365, and Azure) consultancy based in Princeton, New Jersey. Working within client business processes and utilizing Microsoft cloud products, Slickdata helps clients tackle identified functional challenges. Slickdata works with clients in a variety of industries, including a high concentration in professional services, finance, nonprofit, and distribution industries.
to track a broad range of corporate processes, such as gathering franchise leads and managing the site selection, construction, and opening of academies.

“The project was a collaborative effort between Slickdata and our in-house development team,” says Candace Snyder, Director of Software Development at Kiddie Academy. “We use Dynamics 365 in conjunction with various Azure and Office 365 services to make this a full end-to-end solution for running our business.”

KARES uses a broad range of Microsoft products and technologies, including both software and hardware. They include Microsoft cloud services such as Microsoft Azure, Power BI, ADX Portal, Office 365, and Office Graph, as well as Microsoft Surface Pro 4 tablets that give Kiddie Academy Franchise Business Consultants an easy way to access the solution while on the road.

A bright future

Goodwin and his colleagues are excited about the result. “We now have a solution that lets us control our destiny as a company,” says Goodwin. “We implement functionality for competitive advantage and Microsoft gives us the technology and the licensing structure we need to do that without constraints. We don’t need to buy a limited solution and pay heavily for customization. The solution meets our needs today and we can adapt it quickly and cost-effectively to meet new needs as they arise.”

Much of that benefit comes from using Microsoft technology not just to host KARES but also to build it. Although KARES is a custom solution, only a portion of it was custom-built by Slickdata and the Kiddie Academy development team; the rest uses out-of-the-box functionality, saving Kiddie Academy time and money. For example, Azure services provided key components for a library of thousands of documents and hundreds of forms, intellectual property that the company regards as another competitive advantage. Azure services—such as natural language search—make those resources easy for franchisees and corporate employees to find and access without Kiddie Academy having to build a content management system from scratch.

“We have to select the best technology solutions that give us a competitive advantage,” says Goodwin. “It wouldn’t have been feasible to deliver this solution without the Microsoft cloud. We would have needed more staff and more budget and it would have taken considerably more time to implement KARES.”

Analyze this

Kiddie Academy uses Power BI to give KARES an analytic capability beyond what
the company had with its prior solution. As a first step, Goodwin and his colleagues are using this capability to make KARES even better. They are analyzing how franchisees and others use the solution’s features—and are gaining insight into which features need to be revamped to encourage broader use. Next up, they plan to make Power BI a core analysis tool for business KPIs, based on CRM data from corporate and franchise sources.

“We’ll use Power BI to surface trends and other data to help business-side managers make better decisions on issues such as where to locate new academies, how to respond to competition, and how to stay on track with our growth,” says Goodwin.

Security is a concern for many companies that, like Kiddie Academy, are using the cloud for mission-critical business functions. Kiddie Academy evaluated the risks associated with a cloud-based architecture and selected the Microsoft cloud because of its enterprise-grade security, comprehensive certification compliance, and clear communication about network and data security via the Microsoft Trust Center.

“Azure provides enterprise-grade security and certifications,” he says. “That means we can focus on delivering the best solutions to our employees and franchisees, and leverage the scale of Microsoft to maintain a secure infrastructure. And we’ve had no reliability issues with Azure. It’s met all service level agreements, which means we meet and exceed 99.9 percent uptime.”

Save more than $300,000 now, $500,000 later

In addition, Kiddie Academy also gets the cost-effectiveness it needed to make the KARES project feasible. Goodwin estimates that the initial licensing to get all employees and the franchise system onto an alternate solution would have cost about US$350,000. The initial licensing cost of the actual Microsoft solution was about $40,000. He also says that the savings from continued licensing as Kiddie Academy grows will be even larger: more than $500,000 over the next five years.

That’s the biggest benefit from the solution that Goodwin can quantify—but it’s not the biggest benefit he anticipates. “The Microsoft-based solution is the primary communication and collaboration platform between us and our franchisees, and the primary management tool for each academy,” he says. “That makes it mission-critical to achieving our growth targets and maintaining brand consistency. It’s an essential part of our strategy.”

“We feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with all the great people at Kiddie Academy and help them make these pieces of their overall technology and process vision become reality,” says Rocky Pavicevic, President of Slickdata. “Kiddie Academy is an admirable company with a passion for childcare, and it has been a pleasure to enjoy this solution’s success along the way. I look forward to seeing it continue to evolve and improve.”

Software

- Microsoft Azure
- Microsoft Dynamics 365
- Microsoft Office 365
  - Office Graph
- Microsoft Power BI
- ADX Portal
- Microsoft Surface

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