



Distributed Technology Support Constituent Group Meeting Minutes

Sessions: Tuesday, October 1, 5:00 – 6:00 p.m. (20 participants)
Wednesday, October 2, 12:40 – 2:10 p.m. (41 participants)

Facilitator: **AJ Kelton**, Coordinator of Administrative and Educational Technology,
College of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Montclair State University

Session One

Kelton lead a review and discussion of applicable conference sessions

Session Two

Kelton began by explaining how this group was formed after a Distributed Technology Support (DTS) pre-session at EDUCAUSE 2001. Several attendees remained after that session to discuss DTS issues. This prompted Kelton to propose a paper on the subject that was accepted for presentation at Syllabus. Kelton created a listserv to continue the discussion, and EDUCAUSE recommended that the list be hosted through them. Kelton then gave a brief definition of his view of DTS, and described the model in use at Montclair State University.

Kelton then announced the call for EDUCAUSE 2003 proposals and encouraged attendees to submit proposals relating to DTS. He also notified attendees of the Ryland Fellowship that sponsors EDUCAUSE event attendance slots. Kelton reminded attendees about the listserv and encouraged new folks to subscribe to the list.

Kelton then reviewed the central DTS topics that had been raised at the meeting the day before.

The issues touched upon included:

- Creating and/or maintaining trust between DTS and the main IT unit
- The helpdesk systems
- Fiscal disparity between departments (haves vs. have-nots)
- Fee-for-service units
- Providing multi-platform support
- The problems of success
- Faculty vs. staff support
- The “chaos” support model
- The effects of faculty retirements on support
- “Us vs. Them” – DTS vs. Central IT
- Providing training vs. providing service
- Types of distributed IT plans
- Distributed-Distributed support

The group then opened up into general brainstorming session centered on the question: what elements make up a technical infrastructure that allows DTS succeed? One response was that the infrastructure must be flexible: most end users don't care where the help comes from as long as they get support when they need it. One attendee noted that a major problem is a communication gap between the central IT unit and the DTS. At his university, having all units use the same support software, Magic Total Service Desk, solves this. This software guarantees accountability for support and ensures that both groups know what is happening technologically. Track-It is a similar tool used by some smaller institutions. It was also noted that an effective referring structure that allows the DTS to go directly to the second tier central IT support instead of first tier is necessary.

A second question was raised: why would you want to use DTS? There was a wide range of responses to this question, as diverse as the colleges and universities represented at the meeting. The main problem that several schools face is a lack of any central support system: all support has to be provided in-house except for email and the basic backbone. Other schools are experiencing an increase in support demands, or are facing unique challenges, such as at teaching hospitals.

The conversation then briefly returned to the first topic, and discussion became more specific: what means of communication work? One attendee described a system started by their provost that began with weekly face-to-face meetings with consultants to assist in making decisions regarding technology and support. Monthly meetings were scheduled with the departments to make sure all needs were being heard and enacted, and conversation was continued through a listserv and posting web pages with important information, such as licensing information.

The discussion ranged back to why different universities and schools moved to DTS.

- One representative explained how DTS allowed more discipline-specific support, and provided a means for "translating" needs between the faculty/departments and the IT structure.
- Another university moved to a DTS system but did not know how to hire IT professionals- they solved this problem by providing a per-fee central consulting who could pool resources and network between members.
- An attendee described the challenge they are facing to maintain video conferencing across diverse and distant sites.
- One of the universities represented has been using the DTS system for eleven years now. The university is made up of eight campuses of varying sizes, each with their own support. IT provided tools and funded salaries to encourage departments to begin supplying their own support. Originally IT met with the liaisons weekly, but the support system has evolved to a free-form schedule.
- Two representatives explained that they were coming from a different angle: their campuses are combining and they are trying to incorporate the separate enterprise systems so that they can interact successfully. The first issue was how to transfer pricing – how to support both "product lines". The second was that before the merger the separate schools had no way of naming or documenting their processes – a universal tracking system helped solve this problem, but it was important to have certain ground rules in place first.
- One school was able to jump-start the DTS process by having a representative from IT meet with deans from each school to find out what their technological needs were.
- Another university had to take matters in their own hands to provide technological support- the schools identified who in each school was directing technical support and then brought them together to communicate with each other. They were empowered by their deans and given the mandate to bring school needs to the central IT unit. Once the separate schools communicated

with each other they discovered that they were competing against each other for technology funds provided by IT. The schools then worked together to propose collaborative learning projects, and with the support of the deans insisted that IT create a Director of Learning position. In this way the separate schools were able to establish a collective voice that would be heard by the central IT unit.

- One college moved to DTS because there was no Windows or UNIX server support provided by the central IT unit. Now, a new IT director has been hired and she is trying to find a way to provide successful support for these scattered, individually managed systems. She explained that it was helpful to her to hear what folks need and expect from central IT.

Kelton then summarized some of the discussion. From the case histories represented at the meeting, DTS seems to come about in one of two ways: either IT creates the DTS system, or it “just happens”. When clients used dumb terminals, a central IT support made sense, but now that most faculty and staff use desktops DTS provides faster service. Open communication between the units is a vital issue, and clearly defined support roles are needed. The meeting wrapped up with a note from one of the schools that it makes sense for Central IT to co-ordinate site licensing, and that the focus of support, whether centralized or DTS, should be on the client.

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