

User Services Constituent Group Meeting  
CAUSE97: December 2, 1998, Orlando, Florida  
Conveners: Carolyn Livingston, Tufts University  
Tracy Scharer, University of Virginia

Introductions:

We began by introducing ourselves and sharing our User Services issues. There were people from all over the United States and Canada and the issues they shared were similar. These became the topics of discussion. Twenty-nine people signed the attendance sheet and a few more came during the discussion.

Distributed Computing Support:

There was general agreement that as technology moved to the desktop, so did the problems. Providing solutions locally made sense. However, the implementation of this shift in responsibility is not providing an instant solution. Someone described it as a shell game of moving end user computing.

Carolyn Livingston said that at Tufts University, the Information Technology department had decentralized support responsibility but not resources. Front-line Support Providers (FSPs) come from the user departments, but with no additional funding or staffing provided. They have defined service metrics and created a transition plan. They have contracted with outside vendors to provide Microsoft training. The three major vendors are Catapult, PDG, and New Horizons. Catapult's costs are \$600-\$1,000 (depending on the location) per day for a group of 12 trainees.

David Sisco of the Medical University of South Carolina pointed out that a shift in the ownership of the problem forces the issue of prioritizing support. He felt that centralizing and decentralizing were a cyclical thing with IT organizations.

Standards:

Discussion flowed from decentralization into the need for standards in and then into the help desk issues. Many people had mentioned the need for standardization in the introduction. As we discussed this a couple of people pointed out that due to rapid changes in hardware this was unlikely to happen.

Susan Grajek of Yale University School of Medicine felt support is more challenging because of the lack of standards and the inability to impose standards. She wanted to explore technology tools to "confine the situation." Susan added that faculty could be the most challenging to support and no one disagreed.

George Ellis of the University of South Florida mentioned the SMS product (Systems Management Software) which advertises it allows remote administration. However, the product is not doing all that it should in his environment. Dale Johnson of Coopers and Lybrand said it works in the corporate environment. Someone pointed out that having Macs and IPX on a network make this more of a challenge.

Beverly Ilacqua of Hobart and William Smith said that support demands had pushed them into standardization. They have purchased site licenses for MS-Office Professional. They have new Gateway computers with three year warranties and a 1-800 number for service. Mac users are being bought out.

#### Help Desk Struggles and Successes:

Tony Mordosky of Bradley University felt that we will have to address the issue of unlimited demand as there will never be enough resources. The key will be to manage user demand by setting a reasonable expectation level.

Elaine Cousins reported that the University of Michigan help line is being restricted to products unique to the institution. Users are to call vendor help lines for specific product support. Service contracts can be made with IT. Susan Grajek added that tiered service can be an administrative nightmare.

Dalhousie University has posted a \$50 per hour fee for help. Morven Wilson said this is frequently waived for short calls, but used to discourage "nuisance calls."

#### Staffing:

Clive Houston-Brown of University of La Verne recommended hiring talented students at the end of their second year. In addition to the benefits of being a full-time employee they would get full tuition. Frequently they stayed on (as in take longer to finish) more than two years because of the full time job. There was general agreement that it was better to have a good person for a short while than someone who could never become good.

Allyn Chase of Virginia Commonwealth University described a pilot program designed "to cut through the roadblock of filling technical positions." This merit remuneration plan includes a flattened organizational structure with a broadened beginning and ending salary range to make it more responsive to competing offers. He is also able to give hiring bonuses and annual salary increases based on merit.

Other comments included that people like the idea of working at a college or university even if salaries are not

equivalent to private industry. Documentation and cross training are essential. Managers should pay attention to providing recognition and the three T's: training, travel, and toys. Decentralization has added to the staffing problems as departments and IT organizations seek employees with the same qualifications.

USERSERV discussion group:

The Userserv list provides a means to continue this discussion. We encourage everyone who is interested to subscribe and contribute to the list. Directions on subscribing can be found on the page that CAUSE maintains for the User Services constituent group.

</memdir/cg/userserv.html>

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