

Getting Better While Getting Less: Improve Your Service Without Expanding Your Budget

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ABSTRACT

The past few years have been nothing if not challenging for most universities. Shrinking endowments and increased competition to attract the best students have had an impact on computing services budgets across the country.

Rising expectations in the face of limited resources is common across all disciplines, but this phenomenon hits IT departments particularly hard for one simple fact: as every other department looks to improve their service while cutting *their* staff, they all look for new information technology solutions to play some part in their transformation. As a result, the demand for improved IT support services will only get more intense.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.6.1 Project and People Management – Customer Support

General Terms:

Management, Customer Support

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1. INTRODUCTION

Anyone managing or working within a customer support function is all too familiar with the phenomenon of rising expectations. Today's spectacular success story becomes tomorrow's simple expectation. Rising expectations occur in all organizations, but the continuous demographic shift in students makes this a constant reality on all college campuses.

Some social scientists believe that a person's worldview is greatly shaped by their perception of reality when they are between ten and thirteen years of age. Put more simply, if you were twelve years old during the Great Depression or during the height of the Cold War, your worldview would likely be very different from someone who was twelve years old in 1990.

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I'm certainly no social scientist, but this theory makes some sense to me. And if "the world as it was when you were twelve" is important, then consider this: An eighteen year-old student entering into the freshman class of 2004 would have been twelve years old in 1998. That is, well *after* the Internet had already become the ubiquitous presence it is today. By then, millions of websites were already live, and innovative devices and applications to take advantage of this infrastructure had already been developed and deployed. Consequently, wireless networks and on-line billing is to these students what color television was to me when I was twelve years old: a wonderful thing, but please stop telling me how amazing it all is.

Once upon a time, managers could look at services provided and resources needed as being tied together in some sort of linear equation. A manager could say to provide more or improved services X additional resources are needed. More often than not, some additional resources would be allocated, or customers would somehow "understand" that you could not possibly provide the improved or expanded service.

2. ACCEPT THE NEW REALITY

The first step in dealing with this is to accept the new reality: expectations will rise and your budget and resources will not keep pace. Business and social experts can provide some explanations for why this is the case – the increasing cost of higher education as compared to inflation, the rise of on-line degree programs, the higher demand for financial aid from an increasingly cost conscious pool of prospective students.

But at the end of the day, it really doesn't matter why. It's much more important to simply accept rising expectations and stagnant budgets as a new reality. Only then can you move on to the only important question is: what can you do about it?

Being in IT, many of us are naturally enamored with technology. We immediately see how "cool" many solutions are. It's part of our nature as technology professionals. But the fact is very low cost service improvements can be made by focusing on relationships and processes rather than technology.

Following are some things we have tried to improve the service of the ITS Customer Support department at the Rochester Institute of Technology. We don't pretend to have the market cornered on innovative ideas. In fact, my premise is precisely the opposite point, that no matter how creative and opportunistic

you or your staff has been in the past, there are always new and exciting things to try.

3. GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

OK, admit it - there are areas of campus that appear at times to be in direct competition with your organization. On many campuses, the library has its own technical staff. At some schools, Academic computing is separate from Residential computing. Or maybe there's a division at your school that insists on having its own support staff.

Maybe organizations like this should just naturally work together, but many do not. Maybe it's competitiveness, or just the old-fashioned need to justify existence, but the fact is that separate organizations, left to their own devices, have a tendency to work against each other.

This is why you cannot ignore the critical relationships that your organization has with the other technical support organizations on campus. Good relationships take much more than the absence of conflict. Good relationships with other technical staff take time and effort to cultivate. When done well, they reap great rewards.

At RIT Information and Technology Services, we meet regularly with the technical support staff from other organizations on campus. We also lead a weekly meeting where some 20 systems administrators from the various colleges and divisions come together to discuss various issues. We use the meetings to discuss policies and procedures, to schedule convenient times for system outages, and other wise discuss a wide variety of issues. I also meet monthly with the managers of other IT support organizations to discuss opportunities for working together on initiatives.

All of this communication has led to two very good things: 1) These other organizations have an increased trust in the services we provide and are more likely to use them, and 2) all organizations are much less likely to start finger-pointing during times of trouble.

4. USE WHAT YOU HAVE, ONLY BETTER

So you've just received the bad news: not everything will be funded this year. But here's the good news: not everything will be funded this year.

If your school is like many around the country, there may be less funding available for new technology projects. More than one endowment fund has taken a few blows from the stock market downturn of the past few years, and capital spending at many schools has been down as a result.

Less money for new technology should encourage everyone to do one thing: Use the stuff you have better, rather than invest in new stuff. Maybe your trouble ticketing system has a survey module that you've never really implemented. Or perhaps you've invested in a new portal or email system that has not been fully implemented on campus.

At RIT, we've made significant investments in new technology over the past few years, and will put additional efforts into getting more out of these investments over the next year or so. We will continue our effort to tie the university together via a campus-wide Active Directory implementation, and will continue our efforts to convert disparate email, calendaring and file sharing systems onto our centrally managed technology.

Don't get me wrong, we're still looking at our share of new technology, but we will use this and any future capital spending slowdown as an opportunity to refine and better utilize the technology we have already purchased.

5. HELP OTHERS HELP YOU

Customer support is much more than troubleshooting problems and answering calls for help – it is also about helping customers use technology better and more effectively. In this section, we'll explore two areas many customer support organizations can contribute value: testing and training.

5.1 Testing and Quality Assurance

Tired of being "out of the loop" when important campus-wide system enhancements or new applications are implemented? All too often, customer support is an after thought on many application implementations. With a focus on meeting timelines and staying within budget, project teams sometimes neglect the concerns of support staff.

So here's an idea we've had some success with: Offer to have your support staff participate directly on project implementation teams. This does take some time commitment, and if there are many projects going on around campus you'll need to be choosy, but these teams will benefit from having the involvement of customer support. Customer support people tend to bring up issues that others miss.

Another idea we've found successful is to have the helpdesk staff assist with the testing of new systems, especially campus-wide applications. Because they're closer to the customer, helpdesk staff can sometimes spot troubling issues with applications that developers sometimes miss.

Yes, this does take time, but the benefits to our support organization have been enormous. When a new technology is implemented and those initial customers place support calls, they are often very impressed by the ability of our support team to answer and assist them. Many times our support staff gained this valuable knowledge by participating in the testing and implementation of these systems.

5.2 Mobile Learning Assistants (MLAs)

Many IT customer support organizations run training programs for end users. Being close to the customer, support personnel are often equipped with the knowledge needed to users get the most out of technology.

One of the most popular training programs we operate at RIT is the Mobile Learning Assistant, or MLA, program. Users can contact the ITS HelpDesk and ask for an MLA to assist or train them on how to use a wide variety of products such as Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and other software. While most

customers today can easily operate Word or develop a PowerPoint presentation, we often assist with the use of more complex functionality like Mail Merge or PowerPoint animation. While the program does take staff time - most appointments take about an hour – the amount of customer goodwill and positive comments it generates have been well worth the investment of time.

6. COMMUNICATE BETTER (NOT NECESSARILY MORE OFTEN)

Millions of dollars are spent annually on communication, yet it remains a major issue for most organizations. It seems that no matter how much time or energy is spent on communication, people seem to think it's not enough.

The problem with communication is clearly not the lack of it – there's so much of it around – but rather with the quality. With communication, it's important to understand that most people will only pay attention if they understand how it affects *them*. It's not that people are self-centered; it's just that they have only so much time to go around.

A very wise friend once told me his philosophy behind being good at the art of conversation. A great conversationalist, he said, was someone that could get *other people* talking. His main point was that once you get other people talking, they're committed to the conversation, and they'll remember it. The way to do that, he continued, was to understand what the conversation had to offer *them*, and get to it as quickly as possible.

His point applies very well to the wider concept of communication. To communicate well, you need to first understand what's in it for the customer, get to the point quickly, and leave everything else out.

Customer support organizations should focus on being a communications arm of the IT organization as a whole. Again, this does take some time and effort, but the payback is great. Customers will call support organization more frequently if they feel they are in on new information; less so if they feel customer support is out of the loop. Inserting your customer support organization into the divisional communication process will yield benefits to your reputation.

We have done precisely this at RIT. Customer Support Services is responsible for coordinating communications for the ITS division. We develop communications for new systems and services, hold forums and other sessions for projects, and publish a monthly newsletter. Taking on this role has benefited

our department, the division as a whole, and most importantly our customers.

7. KEEPING PEOPLE CHALLENGED: CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STAFF

Recent changes in many IT divisions have led to a flatter, less hierarchical organizational structure. Such organizations, while certainly more efficient and cost effective, provide less upward mobility for staff. Under such organizations, management must be more creative to avoid job stagnation and dissatisfaction amongst staff.

One initiative we have recently created is an "exchange" program for support staff. Staff within the HelpDesk, Desktop Support, and Resnet departments can now apply to work for a quarter in one of the other organizations. Qualifying staff will move for at least one full quarter (we use the quarter system at RIT) to another department, immerse themselves completely in their a new position, then return to their department.

While the program is just getting underway and it is too early to evaluate success, staff are very excited about the opportunity to experience new and exciting challenges. We have had a similar program in place for student staff for approximately a year, and are confident the full-time staff program will also be successful.

Beyond staff satisfaction, this program will allow us to develop a much more flexible workforce, better able to quickly react to challenges as they arise. At student move-in in September, for example, we will be able to pull staff from other areas to assist Resnet, which is typically burdened with heavy traffic during this time.

8. CONCLUSION

The age of rising expectations has now met the age of stagnant or diminishing resources, and working in an IT organization requires greater creativity and more effort than ever before. Just to be clear, there are some situations where additional tasks cannot be taken on without additional resources. Every organization, as every individual person, has a limit to what they can take on. More often than not, however, there are new and creative things that a customer support organization can do to improve its service to customers.

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