

# Empowering Staff: Creation of a Staff Technology Development Center

John Saul  
Drew University  
36 Madison Avenue  
Madison, NJ 07940  
1-908-419-5415  
jsaul@drew.edu

## ABSTRACT

Drew University has been involved in Faculty Technology Development for years, providing extra technology services to the faculty to assist them in using technology more effectively in teaching. However, the staff contingent of the University had been shut out of these resources. They had been provided only with the same basic resources offered to the general public. There had been little effort expended to meet or even understand the developing technology needs of staff at the University. In January of 2002, Academic Technology created the Staff Technology Lab with the intent to provide analogous services to the staff population that the Faculty Technology Lab provided. The real challenges to the creation of the Staff Technology Lab were questions no one had bothered to ever ask before.

This paper will explore the processes that the Staff Lab Coordinator undertook to create the resources and services necessary to provide appropriate support and training to the Staff, so they could make the most efficient use of the technology available. It will also cover the services currently provided by the Staff Technology Lab and plans for future expansion of the services provided to encourage the staff to be as self-sufficient as possible.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3m [Computers and Education]: Miscellaneous

## General Terms

Management, Performance, Human Factors, Standardization

## Keywords

Staff Development, Staff Technology Lab, Training

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since 1997 Drew University has maintained a Faculty Technology Lab to assist faculty with utilizing technology more effectively in their classes. The resources of the lab provided additional equipment

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

*SIGUCCS'04*, October 10–13, 2004, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

Copyright 2004 ACM 1-58113-869-5/04/0010...\$5.00.

that the faculty would not have normally had access to, training geared specifically to faculty needs, as well as manpower to help them develop skills and content to best utilize the existing technology to further their pedagogical goals.

This model worked exceptional well for the faculty but due to some restrictions on the grants used to fund the lab, the staff were shut out of these resources and were given access only to those resources provided to the general community by the technology department. These included software and hardware support for the standard computers assigned to the staff member as well as introductory training on the software used by the University. No further assistance was available to the staff to help them proceed beyond the basics or to help them learn how to more effectively use the same tools.

It was in the fall of 2001 that the Staff Software Support Specialist position was created to help provide additional resources that the staff could draw upon to help them learn to go beyond the basic levels of training.

## 2. THE ORIGINAL PLAN

Due to budgeting and space restrictions at the time the creation of the Staff Software Support Specialist position did not include the creation of an associated lab. The position was to provide second tier software support to the staff to deal with issues that were specific to their needs. It would also have worked closely with the Training Resource Coordinator to make use of the standard training labs to provide specialized courses on skills and topics the staff felt were necessary. The Staff Software Support Specialist would also have worked with specific staff members in their offices to accomplish specialized projects for making the staff member's work more efficient.

This kind of rootless existence would have placed the Staff Software Support Specialist into an untenable position. The goal of the Staff Software Support Specialist was to be a catalyst for change and growth in the Staff community's utilization of technology. Without a centralized location and home base, there would have been a lack of identity within the position that would have crippled its ability to reach out to the staff. The staff would have felt they had no way to locate or rely on the Staff Software Support Specialist if every time they encountered a problem, they need to track him down.

### **3. WINDFALL OF SPACE AND EQUIPMENT**

Fortunately between the time when the position was created, and when it became filled by John Saul in January of 2002, a suitable space had become available within the University. With this initial windfall of usable space, the Director of Academic Technology agreed with the recommendations of the Staff Software Support Specialist that a lab of some variety be made available to the staff.

Once the lab space was no longer an issue, there was still the problem of exactly what computers would be utilized for the lab. There was no existing budget to purchase new computers for the lab in the 2001-2002 budget year. The Staff Software Support Specialist acquired three older computers that would normally have been decommissioned and managed to reconfigure them to become usable, if not ideal, working lab computers.

These three computers, in addition to one more new computer that was a purchasing error formed the original set of equipment for the Staff Lab. The lab at that time was officially being referred to as the "Conversion Lab" since its primary purpose was to aid in the conversion of documents from WordPerfect to Word. The University was at that point in the middle of a move from the WordPerfect office suite to the Microsoft one, and many staff members required assistance in converting those documents.

The Staff Software Support Specialist made two requests at this time to the Director. One was that the position title be changed to Staff Lab Coordinator, to reflect the fact that an actual Staff Lab had been created. The other request was that the now Staff Lab Coordinator felt it would be a mistake to limit the lab to only a "Conversion Lab". The need for the support and validation that a specialized computer lab would give to the staff was already too great to make a stop-gap measure like the Conversion Lab successful. Even though the equipment may not have been up to the standards of the Faculty Lab, the Staff Lab Coordinator felt it was important to make the lab as open and available to the staff community as possible.

### **4. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**

When creating the Staff Lab, the first thing that needed to be accomplished was the setting of the initial goals and requirements for the services provided. To that end, we created and circulated a mission statement for the Staff Lab as follows:

The Staff Lab is open to all Drew University staff as a lab for computer use, printing, and scanning, as well as a comprehensive technology resource for departmental needs. In cooperation with the Aide Station and the Training Resource Center, the Staff Lab provides specialized training to help university staff build skills in various software applications and available technology. The Staff Lab assists staff in integrating technology with existing department routines and data needs, and can help with planning and development of technology-related projects.

This mission statement committed us to assisting the staff with the specialized projects and with learning new skills when dealing with technology, but we lacked the manpower to provide that assistance in the more direct method that the Faculty Lab could accomplish with the addition manpower resources that they had at their disposal.

Instead, it was decided that the Staff Lab would operate entirely under an empowerment model of providing services. The Staff Lab Coordinator and his student staff would not perform direct services

for the staff, but instead would teach the staff how to best accomplish the required tasks on their own. Instead of scanning documents and pictures for a staff member as the Faculty Lab does for faculty, we would teach them how to use the scanners and software and encourage them to come back to the lab whenever they needed to use these resources. It was our hope that by teaching them how to perform these tasks on their own, they would be more comfortable with technology as a whole, and more willing to explore additional means of accomplishing other tasks in their offices with the use of technology.

At present, the Staff Lab provides staff with equipment and physical resources that they would not have in their own offices such as document and slide scanners, duplex printers and audio and video capture and editing stations. We also provide loaner equipment that they can use for special projects such as digital cameras and mini-DVs or laptops that they can take with them on conferences or work from home.

The most common service that we provide to departments is our specialized training on the software packages available at Drew University. Departments will approach the Staff Lab Coordinator with a set of skills and tasks that they want to make sure everyone in their department is capable of performing. The Staff Lab Coordinator will sit down with the director of the department or whoever is in charge of the training and go over the requirements. Then the Staff Lab Coordinator will design a series of training sessions that will provide the staff with the skills they need.

Our least frequently requested, but ultimately most important service is the assistance with technology-related projects. The Staff Lab staff provides training and assistance to help staff gain the skills necessary to accomplish the project with a minimal amount of effort expended by the Staff Lab staff since we still lack the necessary manpower to accomplish the tasks needed to fulfill all of the project requests.

The current Staff Lab is comprised of six workstations and various pieces of loaner equipment. There are two general workstations that have the standard software packages on them, but no other specialized equipment. There is one audio capture and editing station that includes the equipment and software to capture, edit and publish digital audio for different projects. There is one video capture and editing station that includes all of the equipment and software to capture, edit and publish digital video files. Lastly there are two scanning workstations, one primarily for images and one that is utilized for OCR (Optical Character Recognition) software to scan documents back from printed form into digitally editable files.

### **5. CHALLENGES BEYOND THE EQUIPMENT**

Even once the Staff Lab was fully equipped and was ready to provide the needed services to the staff, there were problems with getting them acclimated to the idea that there were resources at their disposal.

Our first major challenge was to get the staff members into the lab. Before we could manage to help them learn new skills and new technologies we had to get them away from their desks and into a more conducive environment to learning. This was particularly difficult since most of the staff have responsibilities and work that

prevent them from being able to leave their offices for large amounts of time.

To combat this problem, we ran a series of special training exercises and open houses that could were only available within the confines of the lab. The open houses we ran were less than successful since the staff didn't feel like they were gaining any concrete skills by attending an open house for the facility. However the special advanced classes on topics that hadn't previously been offered were much more successful. The attendance at all five of these special classes was at the maximum capacity for the lab. It was even necessary to add an additional set of classes to the initial offering due to staff demand.

Once we had the staff in the door, we had to begin to show them what was possible. Through regular workshops, and by publicizing what some of their peers were accomplishing with the help of the Staff Lab, we began to spark interest in areas of the University that had been traditionally very techno-phobic. We felt that the more the staff saw of how their peers were actually using the technology the more comfortable and creative they would become in their own use of technology.

Unfortunately, years of what they perceived as neglect left many staff members leery of the technology departments on campus and unwilling to approach us for help. They felt that there was nothing we could offer them that would provide any kind of significant help to their daily work. In fact, some of them felt that interacting with the technology departments on campus was a drain on their resources instead of a help.

In a situation like this, there is very little that you can do to combat these negative perceptions except to provide continuous, reliable support and training whenever it is asked for. Over time, these examples of good, steady customer service filter out into the

population and build trust within your customer base. At this point, the areas of the University that had been some of the most outspoken against the technology departments are now regular users of the Staff Lab and are now its biggest supporters.

When providing so many new skills and technological options to the staff, it can be very easy to allow someone to reach beyond the levels that they are capable of performing at into areas which are too technical for them. When staff attempt to push themselves farther than they have any reasonable expectation of achieving, it is the job of the Staff Lab Coordinator to place limitations upon them without making it seem like an insult to their ability or intelligence. Once a staff member perceives any kind of condescending attitude they will immediately feel cut off from the resources, and will stop attempting to get any help from the Staff Lab.

## **6. FUTURE PLANS**

At this point, the Staff Lab has a firmly rooted place in the collective consciousness of the staff on campus, and we are looking at how to expand our offerings and training to make the staff as self sufficient as possible. We are working with the rest of the technology departments to expand and improve the training offerings to staff. We are also working on plans to create Area Technology Specialists, staff who would be trained to be the first line of defense and communication on technology issues for their specific departments.

Also as of June 2004, there were plans to move the Staff Lab into a newly renovated space in at the end of the Summer of 2005. This new space will open up additional possibilities with access to a large format printer, and a more central location on campus.