

# COMPUTING SUPPORT TECHNICIANS: YOURS, MINE OR OURS

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## ABSTRACT

The dream of a university computer support department is to have support technicians centrally located and managed, receiving standardized training and competency review, providing support using standardized procedures on standardized computers with standardized configurations.

The dream of every other university department is to have their own computer support technician located in their department, providing support based on the response priorities and hardware standards set by the department head or college dean.

The reality is you can't have it both ways. Or can you?

This paper describes the current support model being implemented at Weber State University (WSU). The combination of centralized and decentralized computer support is a model which evolved from no formalized support, to centralized support, and now to the hybrid.

## Keywords

Support models, centralized support, decentralized support, student employees.

## 1. BACKGROUND

Weber (that's one ~~W~~ and a long ~~U~~) State University is located in Ogden, Utah, 35 miles north of Salt Lake City, home of the year 2002 Winter Olympics. It has approximately 12,000 FTE students, 400 faculty and 1100 staff members. In 1994, a Chief Information Office (CIO) position was created and filled, and the Information Technology (IT) division was formed from the previous Computer Services departments.

At that time, computer support existed, but was minimal and certainly not centralized or coordinated. Computer users were not clear who provided what computer-related service or support, or how to get it. One staff member (IT staff or otherwise) might install software, another a virus checking program, another the network client. Often one would undo what had been done previously or, more important, install something which interfered with usage of the network services.

As the IT division was being reorganized, the CIO specified that a central support department be created. Staff in several of the IT departments were overwhelmed with simply answering phones, let alone providing support services. Two contracted staff were assigned to organize the new support center which was pressed into starting immediately.

## 2. START-UP

The newly organized Computing Support Services (CSS) department promptly hired two student hourly employees to simply answer the phone, write up the support requests and forward a hard copy to the appropriate campus resource for resolving the request--that is, if the student employees could figure out to whom the request should go. It was soon apparent that the student employees lacked sufficient knowledge or skills to ask appropriate questions and write the problem up in a meaningful way. Furthermore, many of the service requests could have been answered on the phone by someone with a minimal amount of training.

### **3. CENTRALIZED MODEL**

Three hourly student technicians were hired (one of the original secretaries was rehired) as CSS technicians (Techs) to provide helpdesk coverage and technical support on faculty and staff computers. The two contract staff members worked at developing documentation and training, a tracking database and service level agreements.

There was an inadequate number of Techs for resolving all the support requests in a timely fashion. Moreover, not all Techs had sufficient skills to resolve every type of support request. Thus, support requests were assigned to a Tech with skills appropriate for resolving a particular type of problem. This meant that the Tech did not necessarily return to assist the same staff members, although with so few Techs they often did. Eventually, when the budget allowed an increase in the number of Techs and a process was in place to train them quickly and consistently, they were assigned to a specific building or department or college as the deans and department managers had requested.

The centralized computer support system worked rather well. Techs were paid from the CSS budget, a small annual base budget supplemented with one-time funds from an academic computing committee and other one-time monies. With the CSS department and its Techs being physically located near other IT professionals, the Techs became acquainted with IT staff, as well as the computer systems and services provided by the IT division. Also, Techs were trained in standardized procedures and configurations which provided the most compatible, efficient use of campus computing services. Often the training was provided by the IT staff person who had responsibility for the particular service, such as the GroupWise e-mail system. Likewise, IT staff became familiar with the Techs who served as advocates, representing the needs of the computer users. All in all, a good working relationship existed between the providers of computer-related systems and services, and the CSS Techs.

Although centralized support was beginning to function rather well from the IT division's perspective, deans and department managers still wanted their own computer support technicians and began hiring them (some full-time salaried, some part-time student hourly).

Generally, the support technicians interacted very little with the IT staff. Also, the support technicians were not trained on standard procedures and configurations nor had an understanding of what campus computer services were available and how they were distributed. At times, the other technicians provided support which negatively impacted the faculty and staff members' ability to use campus networked computer services, creating unhappy, unproductive computer users.

Despite the problems associated with decentralized support, insistence on centralization and standardization was driving more and more departments and colleges to hire their own technical support staff which exacerbated the decentralized support problems. A compromise was needed.

### **4. CENTRALIZED DECENTRALIZATION--A HYBRID**

In an attempt to be responsive to the desire of deans and department managers to have some autonomy and yet to provide compatible, efficient computing services, a compromise known as Tech-in-Residence model was proposed. In the Tech-in-Residence model, CSS still maintains a core staff of Techs but partners with other departments to jointly hire technical support technicians. The shared technician is known as a Tech-in-Residence (TechIR) and each of the partners assumes part of the management and budget responsibilities.

Computing Support Services responsibilities are to:

1. assist in hiring, reviewing and disciplining processes;
2. provide and pay for boot camp training (about 40 hours), on-going training (two hours/week), staff meetings (one hour/week) and one shift per week on the help desk (three hours/week);
3. provide a certification program which includes pay increases based on skill improvement;
4. provide and pay for pagers and other support aids, such as disks, zip drives, virus software, etc.;
5. provide a central support request tracking database which includes call prioritization and escalation, and desired reports for the partner departments;
6. evaluate and test new technology and make recommendations for hardware and software standards.

The department/college partner responsibilities are to:

1. participate in hiring, reviewing and disciplining processes;
2. pay for actual technical support hours;
3. provide a work space for the TechIR;
4. cooperate with CSS in establishing support priorities;
5. include the TechIR in department staff meetings as appropriate;
6. deal directly with department staff who may be too demanding on the TechIR and/or the support system.

### **5. BENEFITS**

The Tech-in-Residence model has been functioning for about a year with nearly 50% of the departments and colleges now in partnership with CSS. The initial results have been quite positive with the issues for the three main participants being most satisfied.

Departments and colleges appreciate having their own technical support personnel who are trained and understand campus computing systems and services, but who also understand the needs of the department's computer users and who provide support based on the priorities of the dean or department manager. Because the TechIRs are hired by the departments and colleges, their opinions on software and hardware seem to be trusted more, even though the information the TechIR conveys to the faculty or staff member generally comes from the same source it always has, IT staff.

TechIRs appreciate having the opportunity to develop career enhancing people and technical skills, as well as having a job which is convenient and fits in with their class schedules and education goals. The CSS in-house skill certification program rewards (increase in hourly wage) the TechIRs for improving their skills. After graduating, many TechIRs are hired specifically for their experience in providing computer support on the helpdesk and in providing technical support.

IT division staff appreciate having support technicians on campus who understand the IT systems and services and compatibility issues related to them. Furthermore, IT staff members know the TechIRs and their skills and capabilities, and at times offer extra hours for participation on special projects. For instance, during the recent Y2K efforts, which were coordinated by CSS, extra hours were offered to TechIRs who participated as they desired and were able. Generally, the projects occur during semester breaks and are paid from central funds. Furthermore, with TechIRs in many areas around campus, the IT Division has feedback from computing users. The communication between the IT Division and the rest of campus flows better both ways and is improving.

## 6. CHALLENGES

Though the overall view of the Tech-in-Residence model is positive, there are still several difficulties which have occurred or could become a problem in the future.

Faculty and staff still try to end-run the support system by going to the TechIRs directly, by hunting them down in the hall or by pager, rather than calling into the helpdesk. Although CSS will assist partnering departments in determining their own policies and procedures regarding paging and priorities for support requests, the departments must take responsibility for adherence to those policies and procedures by their faculty and staff.

CSS's responsibility for keeping training and documentation current has always been difficult and that has not changed. If anything, there is more pressure to provide training; TechIRs want and need it, and departments and colleges expect it.

TechIR management can be a problem since the student employees have two bosses. TechIRs might worry where their first allegiance should be if CSS and the partnering departments give conflicting instructions or demands. The responsibilities must be very clear must and understood by each of the Tech-in-Residence partners, as well as the TechIRs.

Briefly: CSS is responsible for providing training, documentation and information, while the partnering department is responsible for establishing priorities for support requests and insuring department staff uses the departments support process properly. So far the joint management has been amicable and productive.

There are still technical support personnel on campus who do things which negatively impact staff usage of network services. Support technicians who are not shared but are hired and managed solely by university departments other than CSS are invited to attend training and informational meetings provided by CSS. Some participate but many do not, yet rely heavily on the CSS professional staff for support. However, these problems occur regardless what support model is used.

CSS, with input from faculty and staff, sets standards for hardware, software and configuration procedures and does not support other than those standards. Okay--we say we don't and try to stick with that. Departments who hire their own technical support or even a TechIR, may choose something other than the standard hardware, software or configuration yet are upset when CSS does not provide technical information or back up for the non-standard choices.

The already difficult problem of tracking the costs of computing support does not improve. However, because CSS is included in the management of the TechIRs, the cost of the technical support they provide is likely to be known and included in cost of computing reports.

## CONCLUSION

The Tech-in-Residence model is working well and CSS is committed to creating partnerships with more colleges and departments on campus, as well as improving the program already in place.