

## Communication with Library Systems Support Personnel: Models for Success

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### Introduction

While there is substantial literature on how to make information technology departments more friendly for those using their services, there is little written about cooperative efforts between IT staff and end-users to reach compromises and common understandings between the two groups. The literature in the field of library and information science is even more limited relative to effective communication between IT support staff and other library personnel.

Much like any successful relationship, when technology staff and library staff take the time to understand how the other person views the world and keep open, clear channels of communication they can create a much more harmonious relationship than one where one's own needs always take priority. The authors, a reference librarian and a systems librarian, provide an examination of the psychology of techies and the psychology of the rest of us. Within this framework, they offer successful models of IT support staff working with other library staff to establish policies, to set goals, and to form clear lines of communication about technology issues.

### Psychology of Techies

Understanding how technology specialists perceive their work and workplace can help colleagues develop a better plan for effective communication. While we use the term "psychology" in the following section, we do not proclaim to be psychologists. Here we intend to provide a general perspective on how technology specialists view their jobs.

First, it is important to realize there are many levels at which one can analyze library technology specialists. One can break them into groups by area of expertise (e.g. programming, desktop support, operating systems specialty), into staff versus managerial

roles, or into library-degree holding technologists versus non-library degree holding technologists. While we recognize these various roles exist, this section addresses the technological inclinations which all of these groups tend to share.

A study by Wynekoop and Walz (1998) finds that information systems personnel are more analytical and logical than the general population, while they are also socially reserved. They suggest that information technology analysts and managers tend to be more rational, conventional, and confident than the general population. Programmers and desktop support personnel, on the other hand, are less sociable, more predictable and more inflexible than their co-workers. Moore (1991) echoes these findings in her study of information systems professionals. Programmers and desktop support personnel are more practical and tend to avoid implementing what they feel are farfetched ideas.

Santosus (2003) summarizes her view of the mentality of information technology specialists in more everyday terms.

As creative problem-solvers, IT staffers get absorbed in whatever projects they are working on, often at the expense of relating to colleagues outside of IT. As technology aficionados, IT employees don't have much patience with people who don't share their enthusiasm for all things technical. And when it comes to organizational politics and Machiavellian maneuvers most IT people couldn't be bothered.

In the library environment, these qualities of information technologists take on an added challenge for the rest of us who may not perceive the workplace in the same way. These IT personnel are supporting both the desktop applications of staff and, increasingly, those resources used by the patrons we serve.

### Psychology of the Rest of Us

“Talking to technical staff is an art in itself” according to Umbach (2001). She reminds us that technology is such a rapidly changing field that unless you are an expert in information technology, you will be in a situation of understanding concepts behind computing decision-making rather than the specific details. It is important to remember that information technology personnel face challenges when dealing with those people they support. When asking for help, computer users “often are frustrated, angry, confused embarrassed or all of the above.” (Houser 1996)

When making decisions about technology implementation, IT staff generally include security issues, budget priorities, licensing agreements, support requirements and hardware/software compatibility into their thinking behind their recommendations. Non-IT staff may not bring the same breadth of systems knowledge, but they bring a different set of perspectives to the discussion. In turn, they may assume IT staff are being illogical in their recommendations.

Often library staff pass on their technology needs as a result of what is being demanded of them by the patrons they serve. As Tyson notes, librarians are increasingly called upon for technology support in conjunction with information seeking assistance. While librarians tend to be inclined towards helping users, it may be difficult for a librarian to draw the line at where information seeking ends and technology support beyond their abilities begins (Tyson 2003)

### Models for Success

The literature suggests a wide-variety of methods for improving communication between IT personnel and the communities they serve. At the Montana State University-Bozeman Libraries, a variety of these ideas have been implemented to create what have proven to be some successful models of interaction. The Libraries' Systems Team consists of a non-library degreed systems team leader, two non-library degreed systems support personnel and a systems librarian. This team supports most technology applications for the main library, an art and architecture branch library, and several services for the other three Montana State University campuses and five other Montana colleges.

Several years ago a new role called the Electronic Information Coordinator, or EIC, was created for a member of the Reference Team. This is a volunteer duty for a member of Reference and the person works fewer reference desk hours than other team members in recognition of the time spent in this role. The position rotates amongst team members every three years (and the current EIC may be reappointed to this role, at the discretion of the Reference Team Leader and the Library Associate Dean). Initially, this role was created to handle the installation and maintenance of the standalone CD-ROM workstations in the Reference area. As the number of CDs decreased and the prominence of networked technologies in the library increased, this role has expanded into a liaison between Libraries' Public Services Teams and the Libraries' Systems Team. Currently, the official duties of the EIC are as follows:

- **TIG:** The EIC chairs the Technical Implementation Group (TIG) that meets every other week and includes members from Systems, Circulation, Reference, Tech Services, and Administration. As chair the EIC shares responsibility with the Reference Team Leader for bringing issues of public services and computing to the TIG.
- **Communication:** the EIC acts generally as a leader and communication conduit for the Reference Team on technology as it impacts public services. In addition to chairing or attending technology-specific meetings, the EIC gives an update at each Reference Team meeting, raising issues, alerting the team to changes, facilitating discussion of topics, building consensus, etc.
- **Reference Area:** the EIC will act as lead person from Reference working with Systems and others to ensure that the computer set up at the desk and in the public

area is satisfactory. This will include networked public and staff stations, as well as the stand-alone CD-ROM stations.

- Training: the EIC will identify in-house training issues and work with the Reference Team Leader, the Library Instruction Coordinator, Systems, ITC, and/or vendors to identify and facilitate appropriate training.
- Web Team: the EIC is a member of the Web Team and participates fully in their meetings, discussions, and work.
- EMG: the EIC represents reference/public service library computing needs on the Electronic Management Group that meets once a month (roughly). This group includes the Director of Information Technology Center, the Dean of the Libraries, the Associate Dean of the Libraries, Team Leader for Library Systems, and the EIC.

As noted in the EIC description, the position is in charge of leading the Technical Implementation Group, or the TIG. The TIG was created at the same time as the EIC role as a forum for discussing technology issues outside just the Systems Team.

The official charge of the TIG is as follows:

- The Technical Implementation Group (TIG) exists to facilitate communication regarding technical issues within the MSU Libraries. TIG members are:
  - Electronic Information Coordinator (Chair)
  - Systems Team Members
  - Circulation Team Leader
  - Cataloging & Processing Team Leader
  - Reference Team Leader
  - Associate Dean of Libraries
- The TIG will seek input and consultation from library faculty and staff as issues warrant and may request individuals to meet with them or work on projects. The TIG meets biweekly and meeting notes will be posted to the Intranet.
- The TIG will:
  - Bring forth technical problems and issues
  - Assist in setting priorities for technology within the libraries

- Check on issues impacting teams
- Gather feedback on how technology is working
- Consider implications of technologies especially for other teams
- Advise the Systems team in defining and resolving problems
- Defuse situations by being aware of issues within complex projects or applications
- Solve problems by cross team involvement
- Consider new ideas and solutions
- Review and advise on new software packages
- Identify training needs
- Share expertise
- Consider the broader picture of technical issues including campus and national perspectives

The success of the EIC role and the TIG has increased gradually over the years as tweaks have been made to these roles. Originally, the TIG meetings were conducted as more of a round-robin discussion with no preset agenda. Now, the EIC sends out an agenda call on the Monday prior to the Wednesday meeting and this agenda is followed at the meeting. This agenda keeps the meeting time more focused and productive. The Systems Team has grown in numbers since the TIG was formed and all Systems Team members continue to attend these meetings. As noted by Santosus, IT staff may not interact directly with end users, in this case, library patrons. The TIG meetings serve as a way the organization can show technology support staff how their contributions help fulfill the overall goals of the library. In addition, these staff can contribute ideas to library policy discussions which otherwise may have happened in more senior levels of the organization. These meetings provide the opportunity for technology ideas to percolate up through a group which represents the wide-variety of needs and perspectives in the Libraries.

Over the past two years, minutes have been taken and posted to the Libraries' Intranet forums. Previously, minutes were taken sporadically and often lost over time. Consequently, some decisions were made at meetings without a record of what was decided. Some issues had to be rehashed and this made tension levels high. By posting the minutes to an area accessible by all library staff, it made library staff more aware of issues in the TIG and it made all members of that group more accountable for what they

said and what was decided. In addition, library staff can set their Intranet forum settings so that these meeting postings get sent to them automatically via email. Between meetings, the TIG members can add additional notes to the TIG section of the Intranet as progress is made on decisions made at the meetings.

One of the most notable positive improvements that have come as a result of the efforts of members of the TIG is a group focus on the common goal of improving technology in the Libraries. By meeting on a biweekly basis, the TIG members have come to appreciate the perspectives, mentality, and priorities of the other members of the group. What started off as a somewhat adversarial relationship between the non-IT and IT members has changed to a tone of respect and mutual understanding of each other's perspective. IT staff now use the Intranet to post other IT-related issues as a form of communication. In discussions with his fellow team members, the EIC defends the Systems Team when he is aware of the efforts and thinking behind Systems' decisions. Similarly, he will advocate Public Service's position when he feels they have good reasons for their requests. Both Teams recognize the EIC's role and awareness of each team's concerns and they grant him the respect of his position in these situations.

Another positive motivational tool used by many members of the Libraries' staff is publicly praising IT staff following a positive interaction. The TIG minutes as well as other meeting minutes frequently include kudos from staff for Systems' efforts. While it may seem unnecessary to praise someone for doing his/her job, IT people can find this feedback highly motivating. Tyson cites the "invisibility" factor—when systems teams are effective, technology services appear seamless. Most people do not praise systems people for keeping things working properly; they just share their frustrations when things are broken. For a systems person, appreciation for keeping things working well is a welcome rarity.

A final effort made by the MSU Libraries has been to make library staff more computer self-sufficient. This is a more gradually obtained goal set forth by the TIG which can help staff become more confident and able in their computer use. At the suggestion of the TIG, the Systems Team offers classes to library staff on topics such as email software use and web page creation. Some of the IT staff have increased their efforts to not only fix computer problems, but to show users how they fixed the problems. When a hesitant user contacts the Systems Team, these IT support staff try to empower the user to feel more confident by offering reassurance and friendliness in their response. Additionally, at the encouragement of the EIC, IT staff post troubleshooting advice to the Intranet and staff email list to let users know best practices with various computing applications.

### Conclusions and Future Considerations

While the MSU Libraries do not have a perfect model of communication between library staff and information technology personnel, they have benefited from using a variety of methods of communication which take into account the many personality types involved. Generally, the systems librarian experiences fewer communication barriers than

her fellow team members because of her more in-depth understanding of the principals of librarianship. All IT staff have days when it is hard to pull away from a project to respond to a more immediate need. Non-IT staff still experience times of frustration because of unmet technology needs and technology implementation issues. Ultimately, to expect our information technology staff to be completely responsible for adapting to the library environment is unrealistic. At the MSU Libraries, we have found that developing a common understanding of how IT people work and trying to help them understand how non-IT people think is a better strategy for successful collaboration. Being willing to compromise to IT needs and issues creates a much more collegial atmosphere. Similarly, our IT staff now have a better understanding of why library staff want certain things set up in certain ways and of the logic behind their requests. As technology continues to change, all of us will need to find ways to grow together in an information technology workplace.

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