

Views from the Computer Center: What They Wish We Knew

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Abstract

Educators find they must interface with computer centers and the IT professionals who staff them. Most of us work well with these individuals yet sometimes their culture and priorities are different from ours. This presentation will report the results of a study of the service perspectives of IT professionals and their interactions with educators including their advice for users. It will conclude with a discussion of how educators can best work with our computer colleagues.

You are working in your office with a faculty member who has finally decided to jump on the bandwagon of your course management system when suddenly your computer freezes and will no longer access the network. You try everything you can think of to troubleshoot the problem but nothing works so you pick up the phone to call your computer center. The person that you encounter on the other side of the phone may be glad to help you or cause you endless frustration. But... have you ever thought of this interaction from their side?

When the Computer Center professional picks up the phone and realizes it is you will they think:

- “Information Technology and Instructional Technology make a great team, I am sure we can work out any problem together!!!”
- “Alright, these people are ok, we can work together to do this.”
- “Oh no, not another call from those idiot educators!!!”?

So what makes for good relationship between computer center personnel and educational technology or instructional design departments? The following paper gives suggestions based on the author’s personal experience, a survey of Information Technology staff from higher education institutions in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware and advice from Paul Glen’s (2003) book Leading Geeks: How To Manage And Lead People Who Deliver Technology.

The referenced study is qualitative in nature and results are only generalizable for the population studied but they can give us some glimpses into the thinking and mindset of our Information Technology colleagues and can be used to help us begin to understand how we might work with them to accomplish our goals. There were 19 respondents to the survey including 11 females and 8 males. Ages of those who replied ranged from their 20s to their 60s. Their jobs titles included managers or directors, network support, help

desk personnel, systems analysts, and one person who was a professor. Although over 300 surveys were sent out only 19 were returned and it was interesting to see that more females than males completed the survey in spite of the fact that those employed in the IT profession are primarily male (Glen, 2003, p. 54). This could well be indicative of the types of personalities that one encounters in IT for, as Glen points out, communication is often not a priority (p. 51).

The survey contained questions that asked those who work in information technology to discuss the most rewarding and frustrating aspects of their work with users. It asked about their best and worst experiences with users and issues that effect their interaction with users. Other questions asked about the five skills that every computer user should have and three things that anyone asking for help should know.

The most frequent responses to what they found most rewarding in their work with users included situations where technology works the way it should, the users appreciate their technical knowledge, and ones in which the IT professional learned something from the experience. While most educators would probably find satisfaction in all of these, it is probable that a similar survey of educators would include responses that also related to the success of the person they were assisting.

When asked what was most frustrating in their work with users the most frequent responses were also ones that educators can respond to including: they call at the last minute, they don't listen, and they don't know what they did before problem. As one can see there are definitely areas where educators and IT professionals can relate as they try to understand service-related issues.

This can also be said for responses to the reported best interactions with clients. These included people who listen, understand that problems are complex and appreciate their efforts, a person who learns from you, takes that knowledge and grows it and people who give you details of what went wrong and includes exact messages or screen prints. Educators can most likely relate to the experience of seeing a person grow. As educators this is what we feel we are here for and we may not expect to hear this from our IT colleagues. It reminds us that there is common ground which allows us to form alliances and open communication if we find the time to look for it.

We can definitely relate to their reported worst interactions which include people who don't listen or follow directions, people who don't know what happened, can't say, or won't say what happened or the message they got, and rude people who yell at them. We know what it is like to be frustrated when technology doesn't work and all of the above are likely to be experiences we have had in our use of technology. We do need to ask ourselves if, in these experiences, we were the one on the giving or receiving end of the behavior.

So what constitutes a good experience from the perspective of the IT professionals surveyed? According to their responses... "The user is honest about their abilities" and "any interaction that makes me aware that he/she is listening to me." I like "completely

satisfying a customer, and “them knowing the effort I put into it”, one time, after supplying the ability to do a report “you think we gave them gold.” As with any human being, IT professionals like to be recognized for their skills.

Their worst experiences include times when a client doesn’t “respond to your call or questions but still expect[s] service.” Also...I don’t like “people yelling at me” especially when “they caused the problem.” “Some students have anger management problems” and some users insisted that “it must be a hardware/software error when it was probably a user error.”

All this leads us to ask if they are really different from us?

- We like when someone recognizes our technical expertise
- We don’t like to be yelled at
- We want users to be able to tell us what happened if there is a problem
- We want to be appreciated

If this is the case, we have more in common than we might think but in times of technological malfunction, we can be frustrated by interfaces with IT help staff who are not able to assist us immediately or don’t answer the phone. They may seem impatient with us or treat us if we are idiots. There could be a number of causes for this. First they are as busy as we are and one of the skills they wish every user had was patience but according to Glen there also may be other issues, the IT communication style is sometimes considered “direct, blunt or even insensitive” (2003, p. 49). To educators who are usually fairly verbal and are used to giving explanations in detail, this direct communication style can be challenging but Glen further explains that since many IT workers do not speak English as a first language, the culture of the IT department has embedded this direct style into their work environment (p. 49) and we should not take it personally.

Glen also explains another situation that may effect how we are treated. If an IT staff member perceives that someone in the work environment is ineffective due to incompetence they will judge that person as someone who is not worth dealing with and will build barriers to both communication and collaboration with the educator (2003, p. 37). We may feel that we have tried to work with them but if they have somehow developed an opinion us as someone who doesn’t know what we are talking about it could affect the kind of service we receive.

So what do we do to keep ourselves in touch with and respected by our IT colleagues? Suggestions from those surveyed indicate that we need to educate ourselves, including making sure that we know basic computer skills, and something about the operating system we use. We should be aware of web security issues and know how to get help online or from our software manual. In all, we need to be more independent users of technology. In addition, we should be able to describe problems in detail and be able to give them exact error messages. If we do these things, we have at least met them part way

by showing them that we are technology-savvy individuals who are requesting their help with issues that simply go beyond our expertise.

We must also realize that we will need to be proactive in some other areas. Some personalities are better suited to service than others. If there is someone who consistently gives bad service or does not respond to requests, we should keep the IT director or other administrator informed of these problems. In addition, we need to cultivate the relationship that we have with the IT staff, realizing that technology truly is a team effort. Try to get to know them on levels other than emergency phone calls, work on opening good communication with them, finding out about them as people. What are their interests, do they have a family? Who knows, you might even make a friend. While you are at it, let them know you appreciate their work, a simple thank you or a note to a supervisor is important to anyone but a gift of food might also be a motivator.

Most of all accept their culture and know that it is different from that of most Instructional Technology environments. Work to gain technology skills that will allow you to intelligently discuss problems. Seek to be an active participant, ask questions, and follow-up when a technology problem arises. Learn from your experiences so that you are not calling for the same problem all the time when you can fix it yourself. In addition, know who to call; know who works on what system or find someone who is really good and can refer you to the right person when necessary. Know when to escalate issues. In the IT world taking a problem to another level is common. Don't be afraid of offending someone. If you can't get resolution, move higher in the chain of command or to a person who might know more about the problem. Lastly, expect to handle some of the problems yourself because even if we have a good relationship with our IT colleagues, it is still important to understand that they will not meet all of our needs all the time because of time constraints or expertise so get to know the software that you work on, become an independent user and know how to educate yourself if the need arises.

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References

Glen, Paul. (2003). *Leading geeks: How to manage and lead people who deliver technology*. San Francisco; Jossey-Bass.