Helping Students Help: Empowering and Motivating Student Workers

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ABSTRACT
In the Help Desk environment at the Open Access Labs (OALs) of Texas A & M University, student workers perform most of the services provided. We have reached a remarkable service performance level by enabling the student worker to execute tasks from all of the Help Desk disciplines. Via staff webpages, student workers can do everything from diagnosing complex problems to resetting user account profiles. Student workers utilize in-house problem tracking software, reset account management passwords, and write articles for the online newsletter, the OAL Gazette. However, empowerment also reaches beyond the service area. This paper also outlines the methods through which student workers help manage facilities. For training, the Student Training Advisory Board and student instructors help employees' voices to be heard in the planning stages. The Student Leader and Student Representative systems ensure that students help control the future of the labs. All student workers can control their own schedule by using the online scheduling utilities. Turnover rates are kept low and performance levels are kept high by empowering student workers in all aspects of their jobs, from frontline Help Desk to behind-the-scenes management.

Keywords
Student Workers, empowering, service, Help Desk, training, leadership, performance, management.

1. INTRODUCTION
Employing student workers in the Open Access Labs at Texas A & M University benefits everyone involved. The University receives from student workers not only a service provided, but also a unique perspective into the expectations students hold for the Department of Computing & Information Services. Student workers come away from employment in the labs with greater applicable skills for entry into computer-oriented fields and, indeed, almost any workplace in today's technological environment. The benefits of this relationship are only fully realized under the careful tutelage of skilled supervisors. Fostering excellent communication is crucial to maintaining a creative and helpful environment.

At Texas A & M University, arriving at such excellent communication has entailed the following of several diverse paths. An extensive array of online support webpages has been developed, offering Student Workers the ability to correct any number of problems directly from their workstation. E-mail communication plays an immeasurable role in the maintenance of supervisor-student relations. The use of Listserv distribution lists, e-mail news announcements, and an automated scheduling announcement system allow Student Workers to follow changes within the lab even if they work only a few hours per week. Finally, representation by Student Workers in all manners of management helps facilitate communication between the frontline Help Desk Workers and Management Staff.

2. THE SETTING

2.1 The Facilities
Texas A & M University and its faculty, staff, and students are served by an extensive system of Open Access Labs (OALs). The labs are available to anyone affiliated with the University, and they offer a wide range of services. With over 1200 machines available in 6 open access facilities, state-of-the-art projection equipment in classrooms, high-quality photo scanning, negative and slide scanning, and film printing available, and over 150 supported applications, the Open Access Labs represent by far the largest computing service available on campus. Each facility is also fully equipped with high-volume printing facilities in addition to the specialty printing options available, such as color printing, transparencies, and special forms.

2.2 The Staff
Each facility in the Open Access Labs group is fully staffed. Under the direction of an Associate Director, each lab supervisor maintains a staff commensurate with the number of computers supported in each facility. For example, in the largest of the OALs, the Student Computing Center (SCC), staffing is a primary concern. The SCC supports over 500 machines, both PC and Macintosh, and every peripheral device available in the OALs is available as well. The facility is open 24 hours per day from Sunday until Friday, and 9-5 Saturday. To accommodate such extensive staffing needs the day is divided into three shifts, each supervised by two full-time staff members. A Lab Manager serves as the "supervisor's supervisor" and liaison between the full-time staff and the Associate Director. Additionally, the SCC employs
over seventy-five Student Workers, which brings the total number of staff in the OALs to over 200 employees.

2.3 The Support

Supporting such a vast array of hardware, software, and infrastructure demands the attention of a battery of well-trained staff. Student Workers and full-time staff serve as the front line in the OALs. Beyond that, an escalation procedure that includes a 24-hour Help Desk Central, problem reporting and tracking software, and a 6 member LAN Systems Support group contribute to the problem solving process. Training and reference materials are supplied as additional means of support, as well.

3. THE TOOLS

Motivating employees is not at exact science. Instead, many elements must be combined to create an environment in which employees enjoy working. These elements include recognition of a job well done, satisfactory pay, and information that provides the confidence to know one can perform their duties. Some of the tools used to provide this information in the OALs at Texas A & M University include specialized webpages, e-mail communication, and help desk software.

3.1 Distribution of Information via Webpages

With the increasing popularity and importance of the World Wide Web, Texas A & M University has not been left behind in the race to maintain useful webpages. Establishing the presence of web instruction has been a priority for the Open Access Labs, and indeed Computing & Information Services as a whole. A dynamic system of webpages designed and maintained by the LAN Systems Support (LSS) group recently changed the way that problems are solved in the Help Desk. News updates that outline the most recent developments are posted on a daily basis. Archiving and searching facilities allow Student Workers to review documentation on a host of different problems.

The architects of this site insist that updates be done in a timely, efficient manner. For this reason, an ASP design was chosen, and updates can be served out as easily as updating a database. The webpages use CSS to ensure consistent presentation on every level; this helps to avoid confusion and creates a site that is well ordered and intuitively navigated. It was discovered early on that for these pages to be utilized as they are intended, that is, as a real-time resource for problem solving, the answers needed to be found quickly. Search engines were tested and implemented and now, despite the ever-growing volume of documentation, solutions are readily available to all Student Workers.

Also, the LSS webpage offers onsite resolution to the most common problems. Available on the website is a tool to reset a user’s profile; this simple action can resolve a host of difficult-to-detect problems in the OALs. Help desk workers can also reset the permissions on a user’s account, reset Netscape defaults, correct problems with the e-mail software, and reset the default Start Menu. These tools provide quick solutions to so many different problems encountered in the labs, customer service has been remarkably improved. Problems that previously took over a day to report, diagnose, and fix can now be corrected in a matter of seconds.

More information can be obtained from the LSS website, including OAL Utilization tables. This tool simplifies the life of a help desk worker, who was previously expected to count every user in the lab at regular time intervals. This duty was unpopular, especially in labs with hundreds of machines available!

Another webpage provided to the Student Workers is the online newsletter, the OAL Gazette. Written by Student Workers and edited by a full-time member of the staff, articles in the Gazette document internal changes as they take place. The identifying factor that separates the Gazette from other newsletters is the unique perspective offered by the Student Reporters. While other forms of online communication typically originate with full-time employees, Students now feel that they have some control in the dispensation of information.

3.2 E-mail Communications

As in almost every facet of the world today, e-mail has taken its rightful place as the primary source of communication in the Open Access Labs at Texas A & M University. Through the extensive use of Listserv® software, we construct mailing lists for all groups of people. Student Workers are automatically subscribed to their respective home lab's listserv in addition to a common listserv shared between all labs. Through this direct method of communication, Student Workers can quickly share information with one another. Supervisors can also alert staff to imminent changes in time to avoid confusion, as well. This efficiency of communication empowers staff at all levels. Without information, employees, and particularly the absolute frontline Student Workers, feel as though they are left to drown in a sea of changing data. Keeping everyone informed at all times elevates the morale of the workplace, offering the message that each and every Student Worker is both valuable enough and competent enough to be kept completely up-to-date.

E-mail is also an invaluable tool in the realm of project management. Many special projects have established listservs to promote communication within the team. An obvious benefit to utilizing a unique listserv for a specific project is avoiding an unacceptable amount of traffic across general listservs. Another benefit is the ability of project leaders and members to target each other with specific information or instructions, both quickly and efficiently. One example of this is the listserv devoted to the OAL Gazette team. Members can exchange story ideas and information without documenting an entire edition in the e-mail of potential readers. References to previous editions or a prior discussion between members without potential confusion, as well.

3.3 Software Tools

Software tools provided in the Open Access Labs empower Student Workers to assist almost every customer. For example, our problem-tracking software, Platinum Technology’s Apriori, allows Student Workers to report any unusual problems. Answers beyond the scope of the average Student Worker’s expertise are generally derived via Apriori. Instead of sending customers from one helpdesk to the next in search of an answer, Student Workers open incidents and track the progression. Being able to know the reported answer to the question and to avoid being unable to answer the question in the future motivates Student Workers to follow the incident. Opening incidents also lends itself to providing good service: customers perceive an “I don’t know” as less helpful than the same answer when accompanied by reassurance that the problem is being analyzed for them by the experts watching Apriori queues.
Another software tool available to Student Workers is the ability to reset CLAIM passwords. A customer’s CLAIM password gives access to the account management system, allowing them to reset individual resource passwords, claim for themselves new resources, and view their computer use data. By empowering Student Workers to reset these security-sensitive passwords, the OALs have accomplished two goals.

First, Student Workers are able to assist customers with perhaps the most central task to computing on campus. Instead of redirecting everyone requiring assistance to the central help desk, as practice mandated previously, customers can see a very quick turnaround time on their questions. Not only does this increase customer service rapport, it also increases Student Worker productivity; in our environment, productive employees are motivated and content employees.

Second, giving Student Workers the power and trust to access this security-sensitive area of our computer operations sends a message to them that they are worthy of clearance. By expressing to them the gravity of this procedure, we see an increase in student responsibility. Of course, an increase in demonstrated responsibility usually indicates an accompanying increase in motivation.

4. BEHIND THE SCENES

Empowerment and motivation are achieved not only by providing Student Workers with the tools to do their jobs; these are also the results of allowing the Student Workers to have a voice in defining their roles. By bringing Student Workers into the management aspect of running an OAL, we have gained a new source of ideas, inspiration, and a motivating factor with unparalleled response.

4.1 Scheduling

One of the most integral parts of management is scheduling employees. As an alternative to accepting written availabilities and simply publishing a schedule, the OALs at Texas A & M University have taken the task of scheduling a step further. We have introduced a new tool to the repertoire of management utilities available, and made provisions for student input. By using the Open Access Labs scheduler, we have united some 200 employees into a cohesive group.

The scheduler program is all web-based, so students can input availability requests, view schedules, and trade hours with other Student Workers from anywhere on the internet. At the beginning of each scheduling period, supervisors request availabilities from their Student Workers. These are submitted via a personalized webpage, which includes a Java rendition of a weekly calendar, options to prioritize hours and days, and a special section designed to allow students the maximum amount of input regarding their schedules. Once these availabilities are submitted, a supervisor can then view all requests. This allows management to make decisions about hiring based upon a quantifiable need for employees during certain time periods. Next, the supervisor schedules employees based upon a template of staffing requirements. Scheduling is based upon seniority, so employees with a longer period of service usually get their ideal schedules. Often, consideration is also made for students willing to work during periods of low staffing, allowing the supervisor to cover the areas of greatest need first.

After all schedules are made, Student Workers review them and make any requests for rescheduling. For any inconvenient hours left, students can freely trade between each other, even trading between labs. This allows a student that is busy one week to work fewer hours, then make up those hours in a following week. By empowering Student Workers to make such changes to their own personal schedules, we have seen a decrease in unexplained missed shifts and an increase in student responsibility. Whereas requests for leave were often made with short notice in the past, and those hours left unfilled, it is not uncommon now to see Student Workers trading hours weeks in advance. An improvement in staffing and in overall efficiency has been seen in the Open Access Labs, leaving us with more content supervisors, employees, and customers.

4.2 Student Leaders and Representatives

Another opportunity for student input into the management of facilities, programs, and staff has been the Student Leader and Student Representative programs. Both allow a unique opportunity to receive constructive and real input from students, while at the same time recognizing the accomplishments of outstanding Student Workers.

The Student Leader program has allowed supervisors to bestow recognition on Student Workers who have demonstrated outstanding leadership qualities. Student Leaders are chosen by the supervisors from the pool of Student Workers at the beginning of each semester. A Student Leader is then denoted on the daily schedule, and any fellow Student Workers having work or personal difficulties can approach them. Their primary responsibilities include being in charge of the lab when supervisors are not present, setting a good example for other Student Workers, and being ready to answer questions from fellow employees. We have discovered that this program gives the Student Leaders and sense of pride and responsibility. In almost every case, new Student Leaders volunteer for more responsibility than before, demonstrate more concern for the labs, and fulfill the expectations of responsibility placed on them by the full-time staff admirably. This program has changed the face of Student Leadership in the OALs.

A similar program has been instated in the Open Access Labs to give Student Workers input into policy and facilities management. The Student Representative program allows both elected and appointed students to attend biweekly staff meetings with full voting and presentation privileges. The process begins with a request for nominations by the full-time staff. Any Student Worker can nominate as many Student Workers, including him or herself, as they wish. After a predetermined period of time, nominations are closed, and the appointment process begins. The full-time staff agrees upon two nominees to be appointed to seats in the meetings; these individuals are usually referred to as “Senators.” The Student Workers then elect the “Representatives” from the remaining pool of nominees. The elections take place online, utilizing the security features of the web-based scheduling program. The ballots are secret and each student is allowed two votes. After the votes are tallied, the winners are announced and a meeting time is set. Student Representatives can add items to the agenda, call for and participate in votes, and have full speaking privileges.

Student Representatives have been an important part of the biweekly meetings since the inception of the program over a year ago. Their voices have essentially formed the new absentee policy, plans for a new online training system, and other lab policies. Most importantly, Student Workers see the
Representatives as another link to the management of their workplace, and communicate ideas and opinions to the full-time staff via these students. The success of the program is due in large part to the real influence the Representatives have over important managerial decisions.

4.3 Student Training Advisory Board

The Student Training Advisory Board is another way Student Workers make their opinions known. The Board is a collection of appointed Student Workers who make decisions on training in the OALs. The Board is chaired by the full-time Training Coordinator, facilitated by another full-time employee, and otherwise comprised completely of Student Workers. The members of this committee collect the opinions of their fellow employees in all labs and discuss the different courses of action. They then make determinations based upon these opinions and advice from the Training Coordinator. Finally, these ideas come before the standing OAL full-time staff meeting, who add opinions and make suggestions. The end product of a complex process is a training program devoted to the ultimate well being of both the OALs and the Student Workers. The Board is yet another way Student Workers are empowered beyond the Help Desk at Texas A & M University.

5. CONCLUSION

The underlying principle of this paper is that information is power. While this may seem clichéd, it appears that in the Open Access Labs at Texas A & M University, it works. When Student Workers are kept well informed, they are motivated to do their jobs well. When they are motivated to do their jobs well, they can be entrusted with the power to make real decisions on a day-to-day basis.

The most important thing to remember is that both employees and customers are attracted to the same things: honesty in communication, competency in leadership, and trust in the interaction. By opening the doors to programs that foster these things, the OALs have managed to keep turnover rates for Student Workers low and customer compliments high.

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