TAKING THE SHOW ON THE ROAD:
TRAINING IN A DISTRIBUTED SUPPORT ENVIRONMENT

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In spring of 1995, computing support at Rice University began moving from a centralized to a distributed support model. This transition provides a time of change, challenge, and opportunity for all of User Services including training support.

According to Hammer and Champy [1], three forces are driving today's business paradigms:

- Customers are taking charge
- Competition is intensifying
- Change has become constant

User Services is responding to the demands of today's changing paradigms by building stronger relationships with customers. Competition for budget dollars is intense, which means we must approach challenges quickly and with innovation. By distributing support teams "out in the field," we can focus on the customer's individual needs.

THE OLD MODEL

Under the centralized computing model, User Services offered training via short courses, which were taught by staff and students in a combined hands-on and lecture format. Last academic year, we offered 153 courses and 24 special student sessions. Student sessions were often taught by students.

After each course, we requested that participants complete a short evaluation to give us feedback on the course and the instructors. We also polled the faculty last November to get their perspective on our services. According to the data, our courses were reaching students and staff, but few of the faculty. Given the importance of reaching faculty to promote academic computing opportunities, we realized that we needed to reevaluate our training program.

A TIME OF CHANGE -- PERPETUAL TRANSITION

With the distributed teams model currently being implemented, faculty and staff in the academic divisions get primary support from a team of User Services staff, systems administrators, networking staff, librarians, and Electronic Studio [2] staff. Many of these staff have office space in the divisions they support. A small central team provides core services. (For more background on our move to decentralized services, see Rice University's other SIGUCCS paper/presentation, "Back to the Future: Implementing a Distributed Support Environment.")

When resources were allocated to the divisional teams, two of the three staff trainers were deployed, leaving a training coordinator and students in the core team. These changes mandated reengineering the models for training delivery.

NEW MODELS FOR DELIVERY OF TRAINING

With input from the faculty, we attempted to create a program tailored to our customers. Because faculty prefer "just in time delivery" -- training on a topic at the time they need it, we decided to address this as a new model for training. Other models included special requests for classroom training on topics pertinent to the divisional needs and a monthly training schedule for each division. For more dynamic topics, central services will provide informal "roadshow" presentations in the departments. Lastly, with the impending plans to network each dorm room, we will tackle the issue of training the students where it is convenient to them -- in the dorms. Each of these models is described below.

Just in Time Training

With team members deployed in the divisions, training is based on individual needs and is delivered "just in time" to faculty and staff. Librarians and other team members work one-on-one or in small groups to provide individualized training to the divisions. This allows faculty to have their questions answered by a staff member that they have come to know. Each divisional team also has staff with discipline specific expertise, which promotes greater understanding of the applications their clients use and the needs of the different departments.

Special Requests

When training is needed for more than one or two people on a specific topic, the divisional teams can request special classroom training. Training is provided in a divisional classroom by a staff member knowledgeable in the subject matter. Librarians play a key role in assisting and administering some of these sessions, particularly concerning use of network resources. For example, we offered Internet courses in which an IS staff member provided the software basics and a librarian demonstrated network navigation and resources. More recent courses have discussed html programming and building a web page.

Scheduled Training in the Division

Another model developed to further meet the needs of faculty and staff on an on-going basis is that of a set monthly training schedule. Based on input from their divisions, the teams determine what day and time is best and the topic to be addressed each month. The topics are usually 45 minutes to one hour in length and are delivered by central support staff. Examples include a question and answer session on PowerPoint or training on a specific topic in PageMaker. This model allows central services to stay visible in the divisions and meet their needs. We will implement this model in the fall 1995.

Taking the Show on the Road

A roadshow is an informal demonstration or seminar that is generated quickly based on customer demand. In May 1995, we delivered our first roadshow. The divisional teams had indicated faculty interest in SLIP connections to campus computers from home or abroad. Flyers were distributed to faculty and staff promoting the roadshow, central services worked with the divisional teams to determine needs and schedules, and training was delivered in their respective departments. The size of the groups ranged from a private one-on-one session to lecture hall sessions with many people. Based on individual interest, both Macintosh and PC platforms were addressed. Participants were asked what kind of computer they had and what they would like to do, options were discussed, and participants were given software and handouts to get started. Reactions were very positive, and most people expressed an interest in future roadshows.

Training Students At Home

This fall, we are activating Internet connections in the dorm rooms. User Services will provide student trainers to assist and train students on getting connected to the Internet and resulting opportunities. The training will follow the concept of distributed training and will actually take place in the dorms where the students live.

KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL TRAINING PROGRAM

Operating in a distributed support environment requires new approaches to training services. To create a successful program, you need to focus on the customer, seize the opportunities, anticipate the challenges, and become an agent for change. We will examine these concepts in detail.

Focus on the Customer

By changing to a distributed support environment, we have intensified our focus on the customer. Our clients asked for support in their departments -- one person to serve as their personal consultant and trainer. User Services is listening and delivering.

Seize the Opportunities

A successful training program will seize opportunities as well as create them:

Everyone is getting connected

Last year's campus wiring project created an increased interest in the Internet, as expected. By fall, we will have an Internet connection in every dorm room and anticipate an increased interest from the students. As we work with the college masters to tailor programs for their dorms, we have an opportunity to make a positive impact on our largest group of customers and will use student trainers to accomplish a large part of the training.

What is the WWW?

As more hype appears in the media about the information highway, our clients are also asking questions. New technologies such as web servers are generating enthusiasm for electronic publishing. To meet the interest, we created short courses on topics such as "Building a Web Page" and "Surfing the Net with Netscape." These new technology sessions are an excellent forum for reaching and interacting with our customers.

From the Chief to the Indians

As faculty learn about technology and use it in their research, we begin to see a trickle down effect in instruction. The opportunity is to develop relationships with the faculty so that the support staff can be proactive in introducing them to relevant technology solutions.

Anticipate the Challenges

With change comes challenges as well as opportunities. As we adjust to the distributed environment, we have several challenges to work through:

We have a Small Staff

When we implemented the distributed support program, most of the distributed staff were relocated from the central site. As a result, central services now consists of a small staff, which must continue close working relationships with the divisional staff to succeed. Our staff have to remain flexible and open to new ideas and changes. With training taking place in the divisions instead of the central site, the traditional short course schedule will be reduced and will focus on student needs.

The Tsunami Approaches

This past semester, we encountered a 35% increase in demand for services from the faculty and staff. This summer, we are wiring the college dorm rooms with Ethernet, which will greatly increase our

student demand for support. We must be prepared to handle the training needs in a proactive manner.

A Professional Student Staff

Since many short courses will be taught by students, the preparation of these student trainers is imperative. College students are intelligent and computer savvy, but often do not have much classroom presentation experience. Our training coordinator is working with the students on presentation, communication, attitude, and teaching skills. The success of the short courses will depend on the professionalism of these students. Their work will free the staff to work extensively with the divisional teams in training the faculty and staff.

We don't have Time for NIH (Not Invented Here)

Currently, we develop our training materials for courses, which is a labor intensive task. With a reduced training staff, we do not have time for the not-invented-here syndrome in preparing our training materials. We are considering options such as partnering with other universities or purchasing these materials from vendors. The problem is to find a match between the materials and the course content with a minimal rewrite. Due to our customer's time constraints, our short courses are usually two to three hours in length, which are shorter than many pre-packaged solutions.

Become an Agent for Change

Given the accelerating pace of change in computing and on campus, we have to become agents for change. With any change, we must continuously question what we are doing and make sure that we are serving our customers the best that we can. To succeed in our goals, we must leverage all of our available resources and get input from our customers.

To help us in evaluating our programs, we have asked the faculty and staff to give us feedback. Thus far, the opinions have been very positive. As we work in deploying our new programs this fall, we will continue to ask for input and evaluate our programs.

WHAT'S NEXT

The faculty are enthusiastic about the possibilities of distributed training. Given that the implementation has just begun, it is premature to predict success or failure. However, we will post a progress report at the presentation of this paper.

REFERENCES

[1] *Reengineering the Corporation,* Michael Hammer and James Champy, 1993.

[2] The Electronic Studio group supports integration of technology into the curriculum and undertakes research projects with other educational sites and industry.