When students ask, "What's in it for me?" Answer, "A Career!"

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Abstract

Our product at the University of Idaho is education, although our student Help Desk staff can develop superior career skills to greatly aid in employment after graduation.

Recruiters visiting campus have written to explain how well the Help Desk students perform in their interviews. These students are receiving daily training by assisting different faculty, staff, and students with diverse problems. They are at ease with people and have the background to work through the interviewing process by listening, understanding, troubleshooting, and then finally answering with confidence. These are skills they have been developing at the Help Desk without even realizing it. Once on the job, their knowledge of office procedures and teamwork make them invaluable to their employer.

Help Desk student consultants at the UI are receiving "top dollar" from companies such as: Boeing, CompuCom, Microsoft, Hewlett-Parkard, and Hewitt Associates. Personnel Directors are phoning to inquire about Help Desk graduates, as they have been "extremely pleased" with past students who are now outstanding employees. Some of our students are becoming FTE's for the University of Idaho as they continue their education.

Recruitment for the Help Desk positions has been an easy task as our reputation is strong from UI faculty recommending their students to apply for Help Desk positions and by current staff encouraging their fellow students to apply. But then our challenge begins, to retain their expertise after their training period. It is imperative we offer the students a challenge and an incentive to "stick with it," to develop their skills, to increase their technical knowledge, and most important, to enjoy their jobs.

This paper will detail various areas on how the University of Idaho has achieved this objective. It will offer you advice for retaining your trained staff, information on what the students want out of a job, tips on how they want to be evaluated and what type of work challenges they do thrive on.

The training our Help Desk student consultants receive is a valued benefit. We not only offer the technical training, which many of them are receiving in their course work, but also customer care procedures, office etiquette, teamwork exercises, customer service, independent project work, and much more.

The University of Idaho is not unlike other educational institutions, in that we continue to face more and more budget cutbacks. At the same time, we need to continue our quality of service to the campus. Our salvation has been student help.

Introduction

The University of Idaho Computer Services' Department was undergoing a long-awaited re-organization six years ago. Our staff and budget were both decreasing, yet we needed to stretch beyond those boundaries. It was suggested we utilize

our most valued resource, our students. Born from the re-organization was an implementation of a new service to campus entitled "Help Desk." The students were integrated into the Help Desk and we

opened for business in August '93 with two full time employees (FTE) and two student employees (IH – Irregular Help). Growth was instantaneous, where today we maintain four full time staff and twenty-two students serving the UI campus community of approximately 15,000. The Information Technology Customer Support Services are centralized, (our name was changed this past July from Computer Services to Information Technology Services). Our hiring policy for student staff requires we employ only UI students, working a maximum of 20 hours a week. The student needed to be taking at least a minimum of 6 credit hours each semester for undergrads or 1 credit hour for grad students, with a starting salary of $6.75 an hour. Every semester is an evaluation period. A satisfactory evaluation would reward a student an increase of $.25 per hour.

Wages paid were not high, although we did observe a few benefits they enjoyed:

1. Applying their course work knowledge to real life work.

2. Scheduling work hours around their class schedule without leaving campus.

3. The team management approach used with the staff, whether full time or irregular help, allowed everyone to be treated the same.

4. Getting paid for learning.

Upon the completion of their first school year with the Help Desk, they had successfully accomplished all of the *dos* and *don'ts* of the job and were actually quite bored with their positions. Most of the hired students were Computer Science/Engineering or Information Systems majors with a definite drive to learn more and seek out new challenges, although their responsibilities were best defined as an answering service. They were lacking access to important information because of security issues, where in they required added usefulness to their position to serve the whole organization as a true employee. We needed to nurture their eagerness for knowledge. If we could accomplish this, then they would perform a far better job and their customers would receive the best quality service possible. Indeed, we had challenges to retain our student staff

with their talents after their intense training, making their longevity an asset to our department rather than an expense. The perfect design was to hire them with every intent to keep them until their graduation.

Get the "Buy-in!"

We set out to do this! Our first stop was our system administrators. They had given permission and access to the FTE's for specific changes and accounts maintenance although they would not allow a student IH member to have these accesses. Our case to the system administrators was to have the students privileged for this type of accessing, as we could not always be in the office, causing the customer to not receive the timely service they should. As for the security issues, we needed to put trust in the IH employees. We were asking them to perform a Help Desk consultant's job without the adequate tools. To resolve this issue, we administered the FERPA (Family Education Rights and Privacy Act) ruling to each IH student, having them sign a document stating they understand FERPA and the security responsibilities. Access was given and the students' spirits were lifted. IH student responded to these responsibilities immediately, not only because someone had fought the battle for them and had seen their value, but this strengthened their belief in their worth to our organization. If you truly wish for people to be committed to you, then you must in-turn wholeheartedly believe in them.

With the added responsibilities, came a need to learn more and to increase their technical knowledge base with "on the job usage." The accesses were granted over a period of months, to allow system administrators time to observe very cautiously. The IH students had to earn their trust and show the professionalism in which they could carry out their duties. Little by little permission of accesses came and now today, the system administrators are pleased to be able to "download" some of their workload to the students. The overall point, make sure the students understand the importance of the access and permissions and how it is imperative to not abuse the privilege, instead, appreciate the decision of the system administrators to empower them and to earn their trust.

Start at the Beginning

When hiring is completed and the first day of work arrives, the student should receive their first one-on-

one with the supervisor. The supervisor should be prepared with a new employee orientation. The objective of the orientation is to ensure the new employee will be prepared to take on responsibilities, feel informed and important, while maximizing employee commitment. If you feel this is not important, think back to when you were a new employee, what did your supervisor do or not do to help or hinder your ability to get off to a good start? As a supervisor, you will benefit as well from an effective orientation. Also their co-workers will feel at ease because the new employee has been informed of his/her duties.

Important Orientation Points

- It is imperative for the supervisor and new employee to discuss expectations and needs. (This is a must, as left unspoken could result in bad feelings and an unacceptable performance from the new employee).

- Don't overstate the organization, rather, sell the services as a vital part of the university. Explain to the new student the importance of being a team member of support people who are servicing the customer.

- Identify who will assist the new student in absence of the supervisor. This is the introduction to the new student of the team effort that is practiced at the Help Desk. Clarify the chain of authority to help the new employee know where they fit into their new environment and who may be able to answer questions for them.

- Prepare other student staff for the new employee arrival, tell them what role the new person will play and where they will fit into the organization. Ask for their support in welcoming the new employee.

- Prepare the work area and training manual for the new employee. Explain their workspace and make them a part of the team immediately.

- As their supervisor you should define your expectations. This should include tasks, required knowledge and how it might be obtained (resources, training, team projects, etc.).

- Discuss the employee's expectations. Now that the stress of the interview situation is over, this is a time to discuss new employee's concerns, expectations and experiences. Anxiety is common among new employees, this is based on a lack of knowledge or understanding about what the job entails, what the other members of the team are going to be like and whether or not they can meet the required performance standards.

- Last, although possibly the most important – Goal setting – Identify up to six attainable goals for the first three months of employment. Choose the first assignment carefully. It shouldn't be insultingly simple or so complex that it will undermine the new employee's self-confidence.

Turn-Ons for Students

Recognition – A "pat on the back" is a rewarding item when shared with co-workers and given for an accomplishment. It's always nice to be "picked-out" and recognized for your efforts, always state the need for the action, what was done to accomplish the action and how it benefits the team or organization.

Time with Management – Students appreciate a scheduled 20-30 minutes a month one-on-one meeting with their supervisor. This time period is to talk over the projects they are working on, their monthly evaluation (verbal) and any problems they may be having. Also time is set aside for the student to voice any ideas to assist the customer or to better the Help Desk function. (Some of our best-implemented ideas have come from these one-on-one sessions).

Marketable – The competitiveness of the job market is extremely high today, the students want to know how to increase their chances for the best employment. The need to understand how their everyday job tasks will make them more marketable.

Opportunities – Not only does the student want the experience, they want the opportunity to prove themselves with a new venture, such as evaluating new equipment or beta testing software. Training classes that are available to FTE's are now offered to the IH students.

Fun Work – This is where the management style of teamwork comes into play. Working as teams can break the stress level and offer you a different look on the issue. Catchy team names and a little friendly

competition sometimes are a break in the routine and well worth the effort to make work fun. In our office, we recycle our pop cans, take the money plus added funds from the FTE's and give an "Appreciation" pizza party for the student staff at the end of each semester. Holidays, birthdays and special events on campus are always celebrated!

Little Rewards – Unexpected rewards for a job well done. We all can relate to this one. Sometimes the least little thing can help out the worse day. Sending out departmental email with a compliment from a very pleased customer of a job well done is certainly a boost.

Turn-Offs for Students

Past experience – Don't like to hear it. This generation is living in the here and now. Past experiences means nothing to them as they feel we did not have the tools and speed that is available today, so why discuss it.

Inflexibility about time – They need to be able to set their schedules and stick with it. Class time, study groups, work hours, and meetings need to be standardized.

They are NOT workaholics.

Do not like to be watched and scrutinized – They enjoy the freedom to explore new avenues, opportunities to strengthen their boundaries and to be creative.

They are not happy with rules that convert to traditional behavior – Rules must be justified and they must have alternatives to conform to the standards.

Feeling disrespected – Actually, all of us want and deserve the respect from our co-workers and customers. This is something we earn, it's not given. As a young adult, this has to be learned.

Work Challenges

Offering the student employee a new venture and keeping their interest peaked is truly a challenge for their supervisor. Each student will have strong areas of expertise to develop and to draw out. For every IH student there is a challenge to conquer, whether it be technical, such as writing a program in Visual Basic, learning office etiquette or the much needed

office politics of working through the system to express your opinion and ideas to the correct individual, each challenge is vital to their careers. Careers are the most important issue at this time in their lives and presenting them with an opportunity to better their chances in their desired career field is paramount to each student. Talk with each of them, use some psychology, and get to know their ideas and goals. Seek to offer them the challenges and guide them to accomplish their personal best.

If you fire up the interest and show them the value, then your objectives are complete and their interest will grow and serve you and your organization well. It's a win-win situation.

Each student has individual challenges they are seeking to perform for their career. If their performance evaluations are good then the reward is to offer the opportunity to reach more of those goals. After finding one or two projects, I've found the students researching the challenges, presenting the proposal and taking the initiative to accomplish their goals.

Three questions are always asked of their projects:

1. Will I learn something valuable from the exercise?

2. Will the Help Desk staff benefit from the experience?

3. Will the department mission be served by my project?

The challenges could either be an independent personal project or a team project with a span of a semester to accomplish the goal. The personal project requires that they have a proposed evaluation process designed for that particular project and the team project required leadership skills to have all team members pulling their weight.

Three years ago, I added dedicated time for research and development. Each student has two hours a week away from the Help Desk duties of answering the phones, assisting the walk-in customers or replying to our email. This has been very well received. Each month in the one-on-one meetings, we discuss the R and D time and project's process.

Evaluation Time

One-on-one sessions are scheduled every month with the student employee and their supervisor. The semester evaluation should not be a big surprise. Every month should have had a discussion period of, "How I'm doing?" Two points are covered with short-term evaluations. If the IH student is straying off the path, it can be corrected and also the student will understand the value of experience they are receiving is important to the supervisor as well as themselves. Take time to explain what you like best about what they do, possibly their customer care is excellent, make them aware of it. Stress the value not only to them but also how it is important to the Help Desk and the department. Mention the areas they need to work on by offering a couple of ways to learn about their particular situation and then move on, don't linger. By mere mention, they are now aware and also mindful that you are concerned. If your leadership is strong and you have a good relationship, they will improve through your guidance. Now, they realize the importance of learning, to enable their chances of success in the real world later. Sometimes, teaming them with a couple of co-workers who do excel in that certain area, is all it takes.

The written evaluation is their report card. It's important to them on receiving good marks and to have an explanation of their performance. Don't disappoint them by just slipping the evaluation into their mailbox or email. Arrange to meet with each student for his or her evaluation discussion. Ask them to be prepared to answer the question, "What areas would you like to gain more experience and/or training?" Evaluate each aspect of their work, which is important to the organization; customer service, technical knowledge, reliability, teamwork, office etiquette, and the execution/achievement of their project. Always set a goal for the next evaluation period, emphasize their importance to the organization and let them know you appreciate the work they do and recognize their worth.

When they have a difference of opinion, and it *will* happen, take time to make sure each viewpoint is thoroughly explained. Summarize the viewpoints and review them together, work to find a solution. Avoid personal attacks, instead, focus on the issues not personalities. Respect their opinions and give every idea your attention. Support and nourish your student staff to develop a climate of trust between you as their supervisor and the student as an employee.

Conclusion

Entering our sixth academic year, we remember the growing pains. As each graduating senior leaves for that "great job," I notice that we too, are doing better. When they work harder to succeed, we as a team are also running faster and smoother. The remaining staff admires their success and enjoys the competition to "beat that deal" next year themselves. Certainly the customer is receiving far better service, the students are working more efficiently and I, as their supervisor, am functioning wiser, because they are teaching me to make their jobs a career. Who benefits? – We all do!