



A HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO USER SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

Behavioral objectives of user services in general do not include humanistic goals. User services are the personal extension of the computing center. The computing center need not be depicted as a mechanical brain attended to by a robot-like staff. A transformation from this traditional user characterization can be achieved by adherence to humanistic priorities. A discussion of the typical user services' roles and their transformations are presented. These guidelines can lead to a more successful diffusion of computer technology into the user community.

INTRODUCTION

One's environment creates a perspective and set of values which influences others. Computer personnel labor under the specifications of a machine, performing simple tasks in an explicit manner. The logical design of the computer ordains that confused, real world problems be converted to rational, stepwise work units for processing. User services (US) are conduits to and from computer user and computer. That US is machine-like is a triumph for efficiency, but a failure as a user servant. Herein lies a constant irritant to users often overlooked by US.

Mumford states,

...a common defect in planning, designing, and implementing computer systems is an over concentration on technical variables and a neglect of human variables.
[4]

A computing center is desirous of projecting an image of functionality and problem solving elegance utilizing efficiency and computing power.

Townsend observed,

Most of the computer technicians are complicators, not simplifiers. They're trying to make it look rough. Not easy. They're building a mystique, a priesthood, their own mumbo-jumbo to keep you from knowing what they - and you - are doing. [7]

The humanistic approach to user services, including physical being, identification, movement, communication, compassion and goals are discussed. Specific tendencies are examined and remedies suggested.

PHYSICAL BEING

US must be projected as an entity by increasing visibility. The physical location of US can influence the prospective user just as the part of town one lives in implies certain facts about one. US should be decentralized from the shadow of the computer and easily located. Everyone on a college campus knows where the computer is, but do they know where the "people helpers" are? Upon entrance to the building housing US, a map should succinctly show the way to help. Once found, the office(s) of US should project a less sterile, more humane appearance rather than a TV repair shop look.

IDENTIFICATION

User services identification by the user community should be immediate. When help is needed, a name

should come to mind. Pictures of the US staff should be prominently displayed in the entrance of the building in which it is housed. Assistance should create a mental image of a person, not a black box.

In addition, give life to the computer itself. Why must computers be specified as DEC 10 or 370/155? Why not name them Mary or John or Longfellow? Why do banks name their mechanical tellers Abbey or Mimi instead of XZ 13? They do so to keep the human element.

MOVEMENT

More "outreach" programs are needed in US. Movement of US from the reactive, sedentary state to a proactive state is needed. Human interaction in the user environment is mandatory for fruition of novel research. An increase in US employees is not necessary if a system of priorities and administrative responsibilities are established. A staff member can be designated as the human extension of a humanistic computing center. This arm can illuminate the computer's failings, as well as supernatural abilities of which most non-users are in awe.

For time-sharing environments, the human extension can be simulated. A terminal hot line can be manned by US to interact on-line with users. This form of personal contact involves the user who will not leave his familiar surroundings for help.

COMMUNICATION

The typical language of US is computereese, which inevitably causes user hostility. Acronyms and buzz words should be minimized. A non-user level of speech, while taking longer to impart, creates a one-to-one exchange. Documentation and diagnostics for the uninitiated user need revision. Error messages from in-core compilers should be of primary concern.

Computer center newsletters need wider circulations and reorganization. A non-user edition should stress user achievements and computer center policies in English not computereese. Another edition can serve the serious users. Printed computereese in any communication confuses just as well as spoken computereese.

Other forms of user communication, such as suggestion boxes or gripe files, should be discarded and replaced by a telephone answering device. Users respond to the human

voice more than a box with a hole in the top. Another form of feedback rarely used is the non-user rap session.

Smoother computer/user communications can be aided by (1) the design and display of a computereese to English dictionary, (2) the construction of a card catalog, a'la the library, for utility and systems reference, and (3) use of pictorial user literature; a picture is worth a kiloword. The avoidance of stepwise instructions in flowchart form is suggested. As Bruner states, "build a smile into communications." [1]

COMPASSION

The human trait of compassion is often the least found in US. The irrational behavior of users must not be met with incredulity. Misunderstanding should not beget alienation. The computer-like rejection of user ideas can be softened. Self-esteem must be the result of computer-directed processing, not frustration.

The holier-than-thou attitude of some US filters to all levels of assistance. A common catch-22 is to design CAI help files for the non-user who does not understand terminal usage. Or, in reply to a simplistic question from a user, is "look in the manual" the automatic reply when Methuselah couldn't read all the manuals?

GOALS

The immediate and long-range goals of US and subsequent accountability are normally lacking in the reactive computer center. Planning for community education and user responses from without the computer center must be focused upon. The current goals of stressing total CPU time, connect time, or total logins should be revised in terms of man-hours saved, research elevated, or people served. Man should be the key statistic, not kilo-core seconds.

Intrinsically human goals such as trust and honesty need be integrated into equipment upgrading and CRT purchases. The research community should trust US as society in general has faith in doctors. The impression that no task is beyond the capability of the computer is to be avoided [5].

Most university computer centers are not looking for new "customers" because saturation points have been reached or are within sight. In

some cases, these levels can be reduced through outreach programs designed to improve user efficiency, i.e., by increasing quality.

What are the user goals? User motivation factors are required but not normally recognized. These include gratification and reward. Publicize computer research in the community, aid in its documentation and publication in computer journals. Keep faculty informed of conference schedules and paper deadlines. Inform administrative officials of innovative faculty and their efforts. Professional and economic incentives can be stressed instead of, "computers are good for everyone".

CONCLUSION

The system of asserting the primacy of man over physical principles is not the concern of all computer center personnel, but should be prevalent in user services. Massey noted,

Often it [computing facility] assumes a 'black box' character, concealing its internal actions and potential from the uninitiated.
[3]

A person-centered [2] computer setting begins with US. The "rationality-logicality equation" [8] must be replaced with humanistic expressiveness.

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