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Cindy Camp
none

Jennie Bourgeois

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Technology: Friend or Foe to the Support Service Coordinator

Cindy Camp, MA
Jennie Bourgeois, BS

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Technology is a word which causes a visceral reaction in many people: they either love it or they hate it. Some people love technology and look for any excuse to purchase the latest gadgets. Others are terrified of change and would still be using manual type writers if their work would allow it. Whether you are in the first group, second group, or somewhere in between, this article is intended to give helpful hints on successfully utilizing technology and learning some pitfalls to avoid.

When implementing a new technology, there are some simple tips to remember that will make your life much less frustrating. First of all, you should give yourself time to learn new programs and equipment. Too often people purchase a new program or gadget with the expectation of using it immediately. This usually leads to frustration since there is a learning curve to anything new. If you allow yourself time to practice using new software and experiment without worrying about a deadline you will be much happier. Secondly, be willing to try new things. For example, most people have a word processing program but tend to use only a fraction of the program's overall capabilities. Be willing to experiment and learn new uses for the applications you already have. There are many books and online tutorials to help you do this. Next, find a techie mentor. Most people do not want to read an entire manual just to find out how to put a header in a document. If you have a friend you can go to and ask these types of questions, you may find it an easier way to learn. Finally, you do not have to know all the answers yourself but

know where you can find them, whether that be online, in a book, or by asking an IT person at your school.

Within the realm of support service provision, technology has been heralded as the solution to our problems. There are many software and hardware applications which will help both students and staff; however, it is important to remember there is no one solution which will work for everyone. Not every problem needs a high tech solution. This next section will focus on both high technology and low technology ways to deal with some of the main issues faced by support service coordinators such as communicating with students and staff, disseminating notes, scheduling, and what's new in the area of technology.

Communication is one of the most important aspects of service provision. We know this when we are talking about services in the classroom but what about scheduling services and last minute changes. It is important to have a way to communicate with the service providers and the students. Some ways of doing this are: text pagers, cell phone/alpha numeric pagers, email, listservs, online bulletin boards, and video conferencing.

Text pagers are probably one of the more expensive options available; and it is probably one of the most effective. Text messages can be sent to an individual, a group or all communication facilitators through your computer or other text messaging device. Information can be delivered to the communication facilitators virtually instantly regardless of where they are on or off campus. Paging devices with two-way communication can also be obtained that will allow the communication facilitators to be able to send e-mail messages and responses back to the office from even remote locations.

Cell phones and alpha numeric pagers are a little more cost efficient and may be more readily available. It is important that these devices be equipped with a vibration mode so that an audible alarm is not heard in the classroom environment. These can be provided by the institution or can be the responsibility of each individual communication facilitator.

If computers and/or computer labs are readily available to the communication facilitators then sending out group e-mails for non-urgent messages may be an inexpensive means of communication. Yahoo Groups (www.yahogroups.com) offers free e-mail group setup. In addition, you might want to investigate your regular e-mail program to set up an outgoing e-mail group. Most e-mail programs have this capability built into the program already.

Listservs can be used similarly to email groups. The differences are that the individual e-mail addresses are not shown, only the address for the listserv group. Also, when an individual clicks on reply, the message is sent to everyone on the list serve and not just the sender. Yahoo groups are again a good resource for setting up a free listserv.

Bulletin Boards are an easy way to keep people up to date. They allow subscribers to check messages at their own convenience. Discussions can be archived and e-mail notices can be sent when important information is added. Some services allow for storage of common files. (<http://www.beseen.com/board/http://www.ezboard.com/>, <http://www.communityzero.com/>)

If you have a fast connection to the Internet then you can video chat with students through the internet. Some computers are coming with web cameras and if yours does not, it is inexpensive to purchase one. Also, the program "NetMeeting" which comes standard on PCs now allows you to video chat. There are also many free services as well, such as MSN, which also facilitate video chats. The major obstacles involve having a fast enough Internet connection and firewall restrictions at some institutions. A standard modem connection will not be fast enough to allow for understandable signing.

Another area in which technology can help the support service coordinator is in disseminating notes when captioning services are used. In the old days the captionists would bring copies of the notes to the DSS office and they would be filed for the students to pick up for each class. While this works well on a small scale, such as 1 or 2 students, it is a nightmare when your numbers increase. The next step in the progression was to copy the notes onto a diskette for each student. Again, this works fine if there is only one student in the class, but if there are multiple students receiving notes, then it can be time consuming. There is also the issue of damaged diskettes. Many students do not take care of the disks properly and this can lead to a captionist having a disk stuck in their computer. One solution to this is to have the students use memory keys or flash drives which connect to the USB port and are much hardier. When the number of students increases, an e-mail distribution list is a nice alternative to coping individual notes. One final suggestion is to set up an FTP server computer. In this way the captionists can transfer their transcripts to the server and each student can access the server via a password secure page and retrieve the notes for each class. This works especially well if your campus is set up on a wireless system since captionists and students can then remotely access the server computer. It is also nice if notes are being provided

spreadsheets such as Excel can help you sort and filter through the data much more quickly. There are also online systems which can allow you to access the information even when you aren't at your computer in your office. Programs such as Outlook can help you coordinate schedules much more easily if all your support staff is on the same system since it will search their schedules and easily find who is available at a specific time. There are even free programs, such as Yahoo calendar, which work similarly and are free.

Finally, what are the improvements in technology which will make your life easier? Probably the most useful and versatile is the PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) or handheld computer. These devices have increased in popularity greatly over the last few years and have become almost as indispensable as the desktop computer. They come with a choice of operating systems: Palm or Windows CE. They can keep up with your schedule and synchronize both your work and home computers so your schedule is always up to date. You can beam notes and calendar changes to other PDAs so your support staff is up to date with you. You can even have a book installed to read or listen to through audio when you have down time or are on the road. They are wonderful organizational tools for our students as well. Some text books are even available as e-books now.

There are many programs and devices available which will help you do your job better and more efficiently. Do not be afraid to try new things. Think about what your goals are as you start out and how you plan to expand in the future. Know what sort of budget you are working with. There are many programs which do similar things but have vastly different prices. Do not be discouraged just because the program you want is too expensive; you are likely to find one that is in your price range and does almost the same things. Be aware of your skill level and do not be afraid to ask for help. Ask those at your institution to help you with selecting the best technology for your purposes and how to obtain academic pricing. Enjoy the adventure.

*Cindy Camp, MA
Disability Specialist in Deafness
Jacksonville State University
700 Pelham Road North
Jacksonville, AL 36265
(256) 782-8287
Email: ccamp@jsu.edu*

Jennie Bourgeois, BS
Coordinator for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services
Louisiana State University A&M
112 Johnston Hall
Baton rouge, LA 70803
(225) 578-4913
jsbourg@lsu.edu

Resources:

To learn more about computers check out:

- Books
 - Simplified series: Maran Graphics
 - Bible series: IDG (more advanced)
- CD ROMs
 - Video Professor: 1-800-201-7143
<http://www.videoprofessor.com/>

<http://www.freeskills.com/>

Good information. Some areas may too technical for some. Text based
no bells and whistles. Free

<http://www.intelinfo.com/>

links to many free online tutorials and classes on programming topics.
More advanced

<http://www.computertim.com/>

Basic instruction in commonly used programs such as Word and
Windows. Step by step how to.

<http://www.cctglobal.com/>

Tutorials from basic to advanced. Complete demo copies available.
Reasonably priced site licensing for additional training.

http://www.boogiejack.com/html_tutorials.html

Beginning Tutorials for creating web pages

<http://members.tripod.com/~chrismartin2/>
Beginning to Advanced html tutorials

<http://www.netpedia.com/html/tutorials/>
Learning to write html code. Down to earth approach.

<http://www.pagetutor.com/index.html>
Beginning to Advanced html guide. Engaging teaching method.

<http://freewarejava.com/>
A resource for the advanced web master. List free java script sites.

<http://www.worldbank.org/worldlinks/english/html/free.html>
Resource for Free Stuff

Sites for downloading Freeware and Shareware:

ZDNet: www.zdnet.com

CNet: www.cnet.com

<http://gostats.com/>
Free web counter, uses advertising banner

<http://www.web-stat.com/>
30 day free trial, \$5 a month after

<http://www.yinga.net/>
Free counter, no advertising, limited choice of styles

<http://www.digits.com/>
Free counter to page with fewer than 1000 hits per day