The Purposeful Techie: Nonprofit IT with Intention

Streamline information technology in your organization.

By Mark Shaw

Your organization, like most nonprofits, probably has an accidental techie: The staff member who knows how to un-jam the printer becomes the go-to person for all technology troubleshooting.

While most accidental techies don't set out to become workplace gurus, some of these clever, committed individuals truly enjoy serving their organizations in this added capacity. To make the best use of their talents, turn the accidental concept on its ear, and take control of this vital resource.

Clarify the Techie Role

Start by calling them purposeful techies. Help them see their role not as an irritating burden but as a crucial contribution to fulfilling your organization's mission. After all, technology is no longer a luxury. Without a doubt, success today is married to technology.

Here are some other ways to shed new light on your techies' role:

Accidental? Not any more. Work with your techies to create new job descriptions that acknowledge their information-technology work. If you want them to take responsibility for your organization's IT needs, give them the authority and time to do so.

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Unappreciated? There's great pride in filling a role as important as keeping your organization's technology humming. Show your appreciation by giving your techies extra training, sending them to workshops, and paying for them to join professional organizations. Do all you can to fulfill their professional and personal development goals. Recognize their contributions during staff meetings, in newsletters, and at thank-you dinners.

Randomized? Technology is a defined mechanism, not an uncontrolled variable. Accidental techies let office technology happen to them, merely reacting to the latest emergency. With pre-emptive planning and training, purposeful techies understand how their limitations and strengths affect an entire network. They help develop strategies to fund IT, a move that will save them time and cycle-spinning in the future.

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Distracted? A major problem for accidental techies is that their IT responsibilities (however informal they may be) conflict with their core job functions. Not everyone is a natural multi-tasker, but purposeful techies put in place parameters that help them balance competing needs.

Scheduling time for computer maintenance and individual computer-user assistance at appropriate intervals in the day, week, and month will bring order to the support role and create boundaries. Taking control of predictable or repeatable processes by committing time to them frees the purposeful techie to address unexpected requests for assistance.

Isolated? There are limited outlets for techies to brainstorm with (or just plain vent to) colleagues. For this reason, and the fact that technology isn't the techie's core competency, be sure to engage an outside support service. It's key to find the right external resource to complement what the techie does.

A smart solution for many nonprofits could be a managed services provider to help bear the technology support burden. With managed services, an automated resource performs most maintenance tasks during off hours. This resource also serves as an early-warning system for problems before they become critical, giving the techie time to respond.

Take the First Step

Taking control of the way you think of the techie is the first step toward a more empowered, strategic approach. It moves this important role from that of victim and martyr to an invaluable resource with a defined set of objectives and a recognized place in your organization's success. **$**

Mark Shaw, Consulting Manager for NPower Michigan, brings extensive experience in the evaluation, configuration, and support of client/server network environments both large and small. His previous work includes more than 17 years at the Society of Manufacturing Engineers, a nonprofit professional association for manufacturing engineers, where he managed the internal office information networks and systems.