

Raising the Bar: A Training Program for Student Workers

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ABSTRACT

Computing and Information Services at Texas A & M University expanded its Open Access Labs (OALs) from approximately 700 machines to 1200 machines in August 1998. The expansion of services required that we double our student worker staff. We recognized extensive training needs to achieve high customer service and technical skill standards in our five computer labs across campus. We met our immediate challenge, providing training in basic customer service skills, by creating a ninety-minute class designed specifically for our environment for all full- and part- time employees. We followed by creating a program to address ongoing training needs in one-hour weekly training sessions covering technical and customer service skills. We also instituted a half-day orientation program for all newly hired student workers covering customer service skills, our problem-tracking software, our online scheduler program, and other administrative and security issues. Some of the stumbling blocks we encountered were creating an appropriate mix between customer service and technical topics, selecting timely training topics, identifying qualified instructors, and identifying optimum times for training sessions. We are able to constantly refine our training program with input from lab supervisors, our student worker Training Advisory Board, and from training class evaluation forms.

Keywords

Training, Technical, Soft Skills, Customer Service

1. INTRODUCTION

Texas A& M University Computing and Information Services (CIS) employed fifty to seventy five student workers in five Open Access Computer Labs before our flagship facility, the Student Computing Center, opened in Fall 1998. The Student Computing Center effectively doubled the number of machines in our Open Access Labs. Our student worker staff increased proportionately. The time had come to take action on a long-standing need: student worker training.

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Most of the training that student workers in the Open Access Labs received prior to 1998 was on the job training provided by supervisors and senior student workers. We knew that while this approach had sufficed in the past, the sudden staff increase caused by the opening of the Student Computing Center would make one-on-one on the job training nearly impossible. We also had other concerns besides the practicality of attempting to train so many student workers one-on-one in so short a time. We knew that in spite of all our careful planning opening such a huge state of the art facility would be fraught with trial and error and solutions found only while flying by the seat of our pants. We wanted to be sure to provide our student workers, new and old, with solid customer service skills to carry them through what we expected to be a very hectic time.

Needless to say, we wanted our student workers' newly acquired customer service skills to stay with them for the duration of their employment with us and on into their professional lives after graduation.

2. NEEDS ASSESSMENT

2.1 Method

We knew that we needed a formal student worker training program, but we weren't entirely sure what our specific needs were. We knew that we needed to target new student workers especially, but we didn't want to give our long time employees short shrift by assuming that they'd had adequate customer service training.

We began our needs assessment in January 1998 by observing the employees in each of our five existing computer labs for two 2-hour periods. Some of the specific observational targets during our lab visits were telephone skills, interaction with customers, interaction with other employees, professionalism and courtesy. We ended each observation period with a supervisor interview to get information on specific conditions that might have impacted lab atmosphere that day, and to gather input on the supervisors' own views of their needs. We also gathered information about what sort of training topics individual supervisors covered with their employees in one-on-one-training, as well as any training that new employees routinely received from senior student workers. We also collected information from supervisors about areas in which they perceived unmet customer service training needs.

We also wanted input from managers in other CIS areas that interacted frequently with the Open Access Labs. We gathered so much useful information from areas outside the OALs that we began to meet with anyone at all inside CIS who would talk to

us. We also included, of course, positive and negative feedback from our customer comment line, suggest@tamu.edu. The only other data we needed came from our vision for the future: where the Open Access Labs wanted to go in terms of services offered, software supported, and the computing environment we wished to create. Having all of this information in hand about where we currently were in the Open Access Labs, and where we wished to be, made it seem easy to craft a comprehensive training plan for the Open Access Labs.

2.2 Needs Assessment Results

We determined that though the analysis of our training needs was relatively simple, our needs themselves were anything but!

Our existing training program was generally informally conducted and therefore somewhat sporadic. Each lab supervisor imparted what he considered the critical points, but there was some variance in the material each of the new student workers learned. This problem could also be seen in the one-on-one training delivered by senior OAL student workers. We could see it as well in other communication and training areas. Though our supervisors were generally efficient in relaying critical information about new procedures or CIS policy changes to full time staff, critical information often was not relayed to the student workers on the front lines. We decided after reviewing all of this that our best course of action would be an extensive and intensive customer service training session, followed by periodic refreshers or reinforcement sessions.

We also discovered significant technical training needs. Most technical training needs were met by on the job training and experience in the Open Access Labs, but a significant number of unmet needs still existed. Additionally, we found the learning curve to be very steep in the first few months of employment; new student workers found themselves grasping for solutions to common problems in the months before they found their stride and had absorbed enough knowledge to answer the most frequently asked questions.

3. THE PROGRAM

The program we developed mutated constantly over its first four semesters. The information below represents an explanation of its present form. We hope to make further improvements in the following semesters, so you'll have to check with us later for updates!

3.1 Soft Skills

We decided that our most immediate needs were for customer service training instead of technical training or some mix of the two. We felt this was the best approach because so many of our Fall 1998 staff were new hires in a large, newly opened facility that we expected to draw the lion's share of new freshmen in the beginning days of the semester. We felt that we had an adequate number of senior student workers to mentor the newly hired through the most common technical questions they would encounter.

We realized, again, that we wished to give our new hires some initial customer service training at the start of their time with us, followed by periodic reinforcement training as the semester progressed.

3.1.1 Basic Training

We call our introductory customer service training course "Basic Training." We've designed it to be a rigorous introduction to the essential elements of good customer service. It includes instruction in dealing with difficult customers, telephone etiquette, listening skills, responsiveness, reliability, and empathy. It also includes the CIS-OAL Dress Code for student workers, and training on security situations.

We drew from our discussions with managers and supervisors during our needs assessment while creating a customer service overview specifically for the academic computing lab environment. We also found Amacom's excellent "Knock Your Socks Off" (see references) series to be of immeasurable worth! We drew from the experiences of past and current student workers, lab supervisors and other CIS employees for real-life examples and illustrations.

3.1.2 Additional Customer Service Training

We decided that we would also prepare two additional customer service sessions each Fall and Spring semester. Examples of some past topics include "Dealing With Difficult Customers" and "Listening Skills." We have also included other soft skill topics that, while not strictly customer service related, we deem to have a positive impact on student worker job performance, like "Stress Management" in the last weeks of one semester.

3.1.2.1 The Material

We gather our material from whatever source we can use! Sometimes our material presents itself to us, in the case of "Dealing With Difficult Customers." We have also relied heavily on customer service-related sites on the Web, and from our own experiences in similar training workshops and seminars. Sometimes we have just pulled our material out of what surely must be thin air! Most frequently we use a combination of sources and resources.

An example of this can be seen in our Spring 2000 presentation on "Teamwork in the Open Access Labs." I worked closely with Ms. Cynthia Burdick, one of our most valuable Open Access Labs resources, to create and team-teach two consecutive weeks of material dealing with the characteristics of good teams, recognizing good teamwork in our labs and fostering it among ourselves and our coworkers. We spent the first week in a discussion of good teamwork, and illustrated it the second week with a simple exercise. We divided our classes into two or three groups and assigned each student worker a role. Some were blindfolded and handed the pieces of a small plastic vehicle. Others were given the assembly instructions and allowed to communicate to other team members only through gestures – pictures and the written word, as well as simply showing the instructions, were forbidden. The members of the third group acted as messengers, who could receive the instructions from the folks with instructions and convey them to the blindfolded assemblers. This was a fast, fun, and effective way to illustrate the principles and practice of effective teamwork.

3.2 Technical Training

The development of our technical training program is a study in continuous improvement. It is very hard, if not impossible, to assess which is more important in an academic computing environment. In our case, it was more critical that we create a

solid customer service skills base than that we concern ourselves immediately with technical skills, although this may not be true in every academic institution.

We initially relied on handouts and internal CIS web pages for most of our technical training, but we soon found that students requested additional classroom training. We also found that while customer service training needs are relatively constant from lab to lab, technical training needs vary with lab location. One of our labs is close to the College of Engineering; another, close to the College of Business; still a third lab is close to the Kinesiology Department. Each of these labs, as a consequence of its location, is frequented by customers with a different suite of most frequently used software! Additionally we constantly add titles to our list of available software, as well as do regular upgrades. Our technical training needs, therefore, are far more dynamic across all the OALs and between the OALs than our customer service and soft skill training needs.

We created a Student Training Advisory Board composed of student volunteers from each lab to act as a conduit for training needs, commentary, and topic suggestions from the student workers. We also rely on student input given on the evaluation forms we distribute at every training session (see Figure 2). Finally, we try to project our training needs by keeping coming upgrades and software additions in mind. For example, the Texas A & M University OALs will upgrade to MSOffice just before Fall 2000, but we have already introduced our student workers to the upgraded software in technical training.

A sample semester training plan can be seen in Figure 1. In any semester we offer one set of technical training classes for new hires, the "First Semester Track." We offer a different set of classes for those student workers who have been with us longer than a semester. For Fall 2000, student workers employed with us longer than a semester have their choice of Word or Excel training based on the requirements for the Microsoft Office User Specialist (MOUS) Exam. We are unable to fund MOUS. Exams for our student workers at this time, but we do provide them the training they need should they wish to take the exam at their own expense. In Fall 2000 we will provide lab-specific technical training in software most frequently used in specific labs. An example of lab-specific technical training might be training in Food Processor, software that analyses the nutritional components of individual diets.

4. LOGISTICAL CONCERNS

We find that our logistical concerns center around tracking attendance, finding training venues, locating qualified instructors, getting student workers registered for training sessions, and providing excellent documentation and handouts for our technical training.

4.1 Registration and Attendance

We require each student worker to attend Basic Training, our introductory customer service training, as soon as possible after being hired. We also require each student to attend training in the software we use to track reported problems, and a short module on administrative matters including timesheet and payroll procedures and navigating the online scheduler program. We offer this training in at least two all day sessions, usually before the semester begins and just after the second week of the

semester. We also offer each of the component training classes separately on two consecutive Friday afternoons or Saturdays.

In addition to the new hire requirements all student workers are required to attend weekly training sessions. The weekly sessions include the two customer service/soft skill topics required per semester, and the rest of the weekly sessions are technical training. Our system is flexible enough to allow any topic to be postponed or even eliminated should sudden needs arise.

Each training session is restricted to no more than fifteen student workers. Students are placed in a given session by their supervisor using the excellent online scheduler program developed by Mr. Michael Ringham.

Supervisors are provided with weekly attendance reports showing which of their student workers has not attended training that week. A final report is issued at semester end summarizing student worker attendance for use in determining raises during student worker evaluations.

4.2 Instructors, Classroom venues, and Handouts

Our Short Course Coordinator teaches all customer service/soft skills training, sometimes with a partner, as well as some technical training. We rely on student instructors, student workers with special expertise or a desire for some teaching experience, to instruct courses as well. The key to developing a student instructor base is to identify potential instructors as early as possible in their Open Access Lab career and work closely with them to develop their talent. A strategy that has worked well for us is to require student worker presentation of some technical material during every training class; this gives us an opportunity to observe their innate skills and gives them an opportunity to discover that they'd much rather be a trainer than be trained!

Whenever possible we rely on web pages for technical training documentation. While we do provide each student worker with a notebook in which to store work-related material, we find that web-based documentation is more effective because it is easier to distribute updated information and it is more likely to be at hand on shift than the student worker notebook. Non-web documentation is created as needed and updated regularly.

5. 20/20 HINDSIGHT

No analysis could be complete without a post-mortem! One of the things we'd have done differently had our crystal ball not been in the shop would have been to be less ambitious in implementation of our training program. We imposed rigorous requirements on staff that might have been too stringent. We required each of our approximately 150 student workers to attend the Basic Training presentation and two other hour-long presentations in what was essentially a 2 month period. Coupled with the adjustment of an enormous new lab, we may have accomplished just as much in the long run by moving slower and using the time we gained in more analysis.

Another relatively recent change that we would recommend others incorporate immediately rather than later is intensive supervisor involvement. Lab supervisor input was a seminal part of the developing training program, but as the ball got rolling some supervisors removed themselves from training. We recently began involving lab supervisors in a more active

training role, relying on them to assist as proctors during training classes. We have been very pleased with the results and expect even more good things to come.

Most of our earliest scheduling problems were eliminated with the institution of the wonderful online scheduler created by Mr. Michael Ringham. Some points we recommend to everyone, even those using Mr. Ringham's program or something similar include taking both the payroll week and the academic calendar into account when planning semester training. We find that starting our training week on Thursday rather than on Monday makes everyone's life simpler, from our associates in the CIS Payroll Department to the student workers themselves. Similarly, experience has shown that absenteeism in Friday classes is so high that it's advisable to avoid scheduling Friday classes at all! We take our student workers' academic loads into account by not scheduling training until the second week of the semester, and stopping our semester training two weeks before

finals. Similarly we also suspend training during Thanksgiving week and of course, Spring Break.

6. REFERENCES

Zemke, R and Anderson, K. *Coaching Knock Your Socks Off Service*, Amacom, New York, NY, 1997.

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Evaluation
July 17, 2000
Working With Images

Monday 4-5

Instructor: Ellison

Proctors: Burkhalter, Simmons

Your feedback helps us improve your training program!

The technical level of the material presented was:

Way Too Advanced Somewhat Too Advanced Just Right Somewhat Basic Way Too Basic

The amount of material covered was:

Much Too Much A Bit Too Much Just Right Somewhat Too Little Nowhere Near Enough

The instructor was well prepared

Strongly Disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat Agree Agree Strongly Agree

The thing I would change about this course is (give examples!):

The thing that worked best about this course was (give more examples!):

Training that you need in the future (be as specific as possible!):

FIGURE 1

2000A Training Master Plan

1/27	Tr	12-1	Semester StartUp
1/27	Tr	4-5	Semester StartUp
2/1	T	8-9	Semester StartUp
2/1	T	4-5	Semester StartUp
2/2	W	4-5	Semester StartUp
2/3	Tr	12-1	LSS Update
2/3	Tr	4-5	LSS Update
2/8	T	8-9	LSS Update
2/8	T	4-5	LSS Update
2/9	W	4-5	LSS Update
2/10	Tr	12-1	Outlook Express
2/10	Tr	4-5	Outlook Express
2/15	T	8-9	Excel
2/15	T	4-5	Word
2/16	W	4-5	Word
2/17	Tr	12-1	Making Handouts
2/17	Tr	4-5	Making Handouts
2/22	T	8-9	Excel
2/22	T	4-5	Word
2/23	W	4-5	Word
2/24	Tr	12-1	Teamwork I
2/24	Tr	4-5	Teamwork I
2/29	T	8-9	Teamwork I
2/29	T	4-5	Teamwork I
3/1	W	4-5	Teamwork I
3/2	Tr	12-1	Teamwork II
3/2	Tr	4-5	Teamwork II
3/7	T	8-9	Teamwork II
3/7	T	4-5	Teamwork II
3/8	W	4-5	Teamwork II

3/9	Tr	12-1	Access Intro
3/9	Tr	4-5	Access Intro
3/21	T	8-9	Excel
3/21	T	4-5	Word
3/22	W	4-5	Word
3/23	Tr	12-1	Unix Intro
3/23	Tr	4-5	Unix Intro
3/27	M	12-1	Excel
3/27	M	2-3	Word
3/27	M	3-4	Excel
3/27	M	4-5	Word
3/28	T	8-9	Excel
3/28	T	4-5	Word
3/28	W	4-5	Word
3/30	Tr	12-1	Working With Images
3/30	Tr	4-5	Working With Images
4/4	T	8-9	Excel
4/4	T	4-5	Word
4/5	W	4-5	Word
4/6	Tr	12-1	Printing Changes
4/6	Tr	4-5	Printing Changes
4/11	T	8-9	Printing Changes
4/11	T	4-5	Printing Changes
4/12	W	4-5	Printing Changes
4/13	Tr	12-1	Copyrights/Security
4/13	Tr	4-5	Copyrights/Security
4/18	T	8-9	Copyrights/Security
4/18	T	4-5	Copyrights/Security
4/19	W	4-5	Copyrights/Security

FIGURE 2