Whatever It Takes: Supporting Higher Education Executives 24 × 7 × 365

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Overview

Who is on call when your university president’s laptop crashes during his presentation before the board? Where do university executives turn for information technology (IT) help during travel abroad? By the time someone calls the IT help desk, a problem already exists. When calls come in from VIPs, the level of urgency is generally high. The nature of executives’ work requires uninterrupted productivity, connectivity, and security. For most VIPs, IT is a tool, not a topic of study. So when technology fails, their inclination is to turn not to the manual but to the IT help desk. Once there, they cannot afford to wait on hold or stand in line.

The VIP need for quick response is one of the challenges for today’s help desk, and many of these challenges have their origins in the larger impact of pervasive IT. According to a 2007 ECAR study of the help desk, client demands are “escalating so rapidly as to impact the quality of help desk services.”¹ On top of that, constituent user groups raise the question of whether one all-purpose help desk can effectively serve all niche audiences. According to David Wedaman, “The assumption that centralized IT departments can provide essentially universal support of campus computer use is obsolete.”²

While the help desk response to these evolutionary pressures varies across higher education, the model of interest here is the creation of a specialized support group to serve a niche audience. This research bulletin discusses the decision by the IT organization at Indiana University (IU) to form an IT team dedicated to VIP support. It reviews the challenges of establishing the team without significant capital investment and the principle of leverage that made it possible. IU’s decisions along the way suggest some strategies other universities might consider in supporting constituent groups.

Highlights of IT Support for Executives

Pervasive IT has swelled the user community. Increasingly sophisticated special-interest user groups bring to the help desk more complex questions. With specialized software a fundamental tool in scholarship, researchers turn to IT technicians for help not only in using the software but also in structuring research problems to take advantage of the software. Mobile devices and the rise of social networking blur the divide between academic and personal IT use. These factors combine to push the enterprise help desk to adapt and evolve.

Solutions to these challenges generally tend to organize around hardware or software application area or university role. To meet the spike in demand for consulting and support for using technology in the classroom, IU created campus-based Centers for Teaching and Learning. When mobility entered the picture, IU targeted specialists to provide second-tier support.

Strategies for addressing role-based IT vary across higher education. One model, not in use at IU, is the internal service level agreement (SLA), a contract negotiated between the IT support unit and a given user group, that defines service expectations and partner responsibilities. Respondents to an ECAR study identified the following targeted client demand areas:

1. Internal SLA
2. Enterprise IT help desk
3. Virtual IT lab
4. Mobile devices
5. Social networking
6. Academic research software
7. Classroom technology
groups in order of frequency: academic departments, administrative departments, the
institution as a whole, groups (e.g., students, faculty), centers/institutes,
system/consortial institutes, external customers, affiliated organizations, and other.  

Though the university VIP is absent from this roster, some institutions do target top
executives for special support. In informal conversation with other universities, the
authors found these VIP support strategies in use: a group outside the IT organization, a
24-hour help line, a decentralized service group, and a central IT point of contact who
locates the appropriate consultant.

The specialized support service IU provides for VIPs appears, as of this writing, to be
the only one of its kind across higher education. The Executive IT Support (EITS) team
of seven full-time-equivalent technicians plus a manager provides executive offices with
a complete spectrum of IT support, 24 × 7 × 365, locally and remotely. The team
secures servers, configures smartphones, provides audio/video conferencing support on
campus and at a distance, installs work-at-home networks, and proactively provides
security education and resources. The team was created in 2007 after the university
president asked the IT organization, University Information Technology Services (UITS),
to provide VIPs with the highest level of IT service and support, around the clock. New
IT dollars for the initiative were not in the budget, so IU got creative.

Conceptualizing Executive Support

Establishing a team to provide 24 × 7 global support is a major structural and
organizational undertaking. The team’s charge—to “do whatever it takes” to support
executives—ups the ante. The language is intentionally vague. Along with fixing a PC, it
may mean researching international data/voice plans for a VIP travelling in China or
setting up a remote conferencing system. It can involve conceptualizing and delivering
solutions to one-off problems. Unpredictability is a given. The edges of responsibility
extend beyond traditional IT service perimeters. The work is not about volume but about
quick response and creative solutions, whatever the problem. At its base is the solid
Nordstrom customer service model.

Leverage Resources

It is possible to create a specialized team without new capital. The key: leverage existing
resources. Leverage makes sense financially and operationally. At IU, it puts the full
scope of UITS support resources at EITS disposal—central consultants, local support
providers (LSPs) in schools and departments, network and telecommunications
technologists, enterprise systems specialists, research technologists, security staff, and
so on. Creating the team within the Support Division ensures its place in the support
communications loop of operational and technical updates, division and technical
meetings, briefings, and alerts.

Buy-in is key to leverage, even with a presidential directive. In IU’s experience the
investment in securing buy-in up front translated into early help from other support
managers, including the loan of staff, during EITS start-up. Benefit continues over the
long term.
Defining VIP Support

Creating an effective executive support program means digging into the details of the VIP professional life. The work is often sensitive and urgent. Individual VIPs, who maintain multiple offices on multiple campuses, each equipped with desktop and network equipment, can equate to more than one “client.” Many work late into the evening and on weekends, from the office, from home, and remotely. Among their tools are laptops, PDAs, cell phones, and GPSs.

In an earlier model at IU, executives were served by LSPs, technicians who were not affiliated with UITS but hired by each school, department, or group of departments. Each LSP constituency included all staff, faculty, and VIPs in the designated school or department. Sustaining specialized support for a group of individuals within each LSP area was not an option.

On the other hand, a professional team dedicated to supporting the aggregate VIP client group allows for the breadth and depth that can only come with focused attention over time. A large part of sustaining executive productivity is heading off problems before they develop. Being proactive requires knowledge—of the client, the IT environment, and the work culture. A professional staff (unlike hourly workers prone to turnover) can sustain the communication needed to build that knowledge. ECAR research confirms that improved quality of service is largely achieved through “improved communication between service provider and recipient.”

Finding the Right Staff

VIP support makes rigorous demands. Staff must be technically outstanding, agree to outsized time commitments, and tolerate steady stress. Can university salaries attract such Olympian strengths? At IU, where EITS staff are compensated at the top end of the consultant scale, salary is only one part of the draw.

As significant, it seems, is the chance to be part of a high-impact team. Staff are the IT equivalent of emergency medical technicians, doing work that’s important and sometimes urgent, interacting with clients face to face, creating solutions, seeing their work make a visible difference. That role inside the IT division can be as appealing as it is to some in the civic sector.

While overall technical acumen is a requirement in any support role, other skill sets are especially important in executive support, including high-level, broad technical knowledge for daily troubleshooting; network configuration skills; and a wide spectrum of security expertise. Technical acumen alone isn’t enough. The VIP support role assumes maturity, problem solving, flexibility, decision making, and the highest level of customer service.
A team manager with technical acuity on par with staff brings advantages in decision making and negotiating for and allocating resources. Excellent people-management skills aid in building cohesion and supporting the team under sustained pressure. A manager with a long association with the IT organization and the university has the advantage over a new hire in being able to navigate the complex university environment.

**Strategies for Supporting Executives**

In any client group, security is a moving target. For most IT users, including IT staff, there are never too many reminders. EITS clients comprise IU’s highest executive offices: the president’s and vice president’s offices, university counsel, and the board of trustees, along with their immediate representatives and support personnel. Data access, privacy, and security are fundamental in their work.

**Security: Concern One**

It makes sense to proactively and routinely handle security issues. Securing the physical environment of individual machines and servers will likely involve digging into individual habits. Are antivirus protection programs installed and running on client workstations? How much can be automated? Are clients using (and updating) passphrases? How are sensitive data handled and stored? An early scan of the IT environment will reveal vulnerabilities, but after the initial clean sweep, plan on routine checks for best practices and proactively install updates and patches. Securing networks, platforms, applications, and data while ensuring needed levels of data access is a balancing act. Working with a university security office can help staff create and maintain that balance.

**Equipment**

Immersion in the client’s IT environment can help staff define and prioritize essential services, equip its own office, and stay poised for quick response. To save time, keep the most common client equipment on hand and know it thoroughly. Such equipment may include spare laptops, desktop machines, mice, printers, cell phones, smartphones, audio headsets, webcams, and even extension cords and cable modems that can be loaned until equipment can be fixed or replaced. For after-hours calls, EITS keeps an emergency repair kit packed and ready in the office.

EITS established basic ground rules for making house calls to VIPs working from home. When gray areas emerge, the first priority remains: Make a sound decision quickly. Issues that later need discussion are handled in a group post mortem.

**Planning and Proactivity**

Any strategies that promote service efficiency can maximize the effectiveness of a small team stretched thin. The key is being proactive. Addressing issues before they become problems reduces service calls, pare client downtime, and leaves more room in the schedule for introducing clients to software and practices that augment productivity and maintain security and privacy.
It can be helpful in matching resources to demand a log of activity across time to minimize guesswork. IU’s EITS manager tracks the number of new incidents by hour of the day and the number of problems and trouble-ticket updates logged during and after work hours. Metrics aggregated over two years reveal Monday and Tuesday mornings as the busiest week times. Other data show EITS handled 82 after-hours calls its first year and projects 103 after-hours calls by the end of the current fiscal year. Though the volume of these calls is low—on average of about two per week—each resolved incident represents a contribution to executive productivity.

Communicating and Making Contact

Trust is an important but unquantifiable part of an effective support relationship. Because IU was introducing a new VIP support strategy, it was important for EITS staff to meet its clients, introduce the team, and explain the new support model.

Trust involves making contact easy, convenient, and reliable. At IU, VIPs can reach EITS in person (EITS is housed in an area dense with executive offices), via a single phone number, or by e-mail to the group account, which all staff read. Tickets are carefully tracked. When contacts come in that require action, staff enter them into a trouble-ticket system. Each e-mail request automatically creates a new ticket, which stays active until the problem is resolved. At that point, the consultant in charge updates the ticket and closes the case. All EITS staff carry smartphones for receiving and sending calls, messages, and e-mail.

When VIPs contact EITS after hours, on weekends, and on holidays, a Unified Messaging Service (UMS) setup on the phone system offers two options. Clients can leave messages for non-emergency issues, which staff handle during working hours; urgent calls roll over to the mobile phone of the consultant on call.

Early on, a few client contacts were unintentionally lost. In response, EITS arranged for IU’s UMS to send e-mail to the on-call staff, the group account, and the manager. The entire team is aware of the call. Once the on-call technician answers the call, he alerts the manager. If the manager does not hear the call has been answered, she contacts the on-call technician or another staff member. This multiple-check system has so far prevented further dropped contacts.

Sustaining the Team

Membership in the enterprise support organization provides enormous benefits to EITS—software, automation tools, human resources, and the experience of UITS staff and the extended support team. Some further considerations can augment team response and efficiency.

The Importance of Autonomy

Endow an experienced technician with agility and autonomy, and you shorten the time between problem and resolution. EITS technicians are encouraged to determine the scope of their responsibility case by case. If the most efficient solution is to fix the problem, even if some of the work falls within the purview of another UITS or IU unit,
EITS has the authority to proceed. If a GPS fails to direct an executive to the site of a critical meeting in another state, EITS will consult Google maps or local travel information to provide the quickest answer, rather than refer the client to another information source.

Combating Burnout

It may initially take competitive salaries to build a high-functioning team to meet high-level demands. Sustaining a group of perfectionists under pressure to perform takes good people-management skills. Use strategies that prevent burnout. Encourage camaraderie and a sense of humor in the trenches. Know how and when to kick back. Take turns being the superhero. Rotating on-call assignments provides a change of pace. Build time in the schedule for projects, training, and testing ideas and equipment. In working at the edge, professional development is not a perk. It’s a necessity.

Is there a risk EITS could be perceived as elite and privileged? It serves a relatively small client base; it works with one person at a time. It has more opportunities than the central help desk to test new equipment, exercise creativity, and act autonomously. In IU’s experience, the demands of the job outweigh perceptions of privilege. The 24 × 7 × 365 schedule, being on call (and the possibility of missing Thanksgiving dinner or the big game), and high levels of stress are natural selectors for those who tend to thrive under those conditions.

Looking Ahead

In the two years of EITS existence, the number of individuals and devices supported grew from 168 people and 459 devices at the end of June 2008 to 199 and 536, respectively, in January 2009. So far EITS has met demand by automating or streamlining some processes and training one technician as a security officer. If the trend continues, hiring new staff is unlikely in the current fiscal climate.

What It Means to Higher Education

The IT help desk today would be unrecognizable to the technicians who ran it 10 or 15 years ago. Support providers need broad and deep technical skills and customer service skills appropriate for all university clients. A persistent learning curve and the need to continually evolve come with the job. The audience at large and its constituent groups require help appropriate to all ways in which they use IT. What support model(s) will best accommodate future changes? Latimer et al. suggest a provocative direction for the help desk of the future, based on harnessing the mass intelligence of support providers and trusted users to create a “shared base of knowledge.”

In the meantime, IU’s experience suggests it is feasible to create a specialized support team within and alongside the enterprise support division without major capital investment. Is this a sound investment? How do you calculate the value to the institution of improving the efficiency of its highest-paid executives?
For the IT organization, the EITS model may provide long-term benefit. There are likely advantages to nesting a specialized group within the central support unit. Applied leverage creates a circle of give and take. In supporting a niche audience, EITS works at the edge of the IT organization, technically and operationally. The presence of a targeted expert group at the edge can serve to elevate the expertise of the support organization as a whole. EITS gains expertise as it tests new IT equipment and creates new solutions. It shares this knowledge with the extended support team, which then leverages it to serve the greater university community. As a partner at the edge, EITS acts as a link between UITS and the departmental IT organizations, sharing goals and information, and noting areas where each can benefit the other. It extends the network of communication and input, and from its perspective within and outside of the core team, can serve as an ambassador for change.

Key Questions to Ask

- How are our institutional executives currently supported in their IT activities? Where, how, and when do our executives work?
- How do we assess the security of our executive’s computers, and what security practices they follow?
- How do executives currently learn about and adopt IT policies and best practices?
- What is the cost of an IT support service for executives? What does it cost not to have this?
- Does our central IT support organization have the financial support to launch and sustain a support program for institutional executives?

Where to Learn More

Endnotes


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