Are Your IT Staff Working Too Hard?

Tackling the problems behind excessive overtime prevents legal problems, staff turnover, and user dissatisfaction with the IT department's customer service

By **Alan Oxley**

[The United Kingdom, where author Alan Oxley is an IT manager, has a system of workplace regulations to protect workers. Even so, IT workers frequently encounter the same long hours and stresses as their peers in other countries. Oxley addresses the issue in a way that can benefit IT managers everywhere. —Ed.]

As IT managers, how do we protect our staff from working excessively long hours? They might feel organizational pressures or personal impulses to work overtime—or both. Even good employers turn a blind eye to understaffing if they regard IT as a cost center rather than a profit center, and some staff work excessive hours because they are workaholics.

To begin addressing the problem of overworked staff, we first must educate ourselves about legal regulations governing time spent at work. Failing to meet such requirements can expose a university to potentially expensive and embarrassing lawsuits.

Senior managers also need to understand that the demands on IT staff just keep increasing. Even if we restrict ourselves to considering only recent advances in instructional technology, we'll find a glut of ideas for new technologies needing IT support. Management must exercise caution in the speed with which the university adopts new technologies, limiting and controlling new IT initiatives to those most important to the university's educational goals and to those it can adequately support. Senior management also must realize that IT staff have become responsible for areas once not regarded as IT-related, such as telephony, photocopying, and CCTV. These various work stressors can lead to frequent overtime among IT staff and negatively affect user perceptions of IT support.

Recurring Themes in Technology Proposals

Universities regularly consider proposals for changing their IT resources, with recurring themes demanding management attention. Remote access is often on the agenda, for example, deciding how best to cater for those students living off campus. They too need good access to computers and the university network. Some universities

envisage students anywhere on campus, indoors or outdoors, receiving live lectures on their portable PCs or even their PDAs and cell phones.

Streaming audio and video is another regularly occurring theme. For some time universities have had concerns about students downloading MP3 files excessively, thus degrading the Internet response time for users engaged in academic activities. Now these bandwidth concerns have stretched to include social networking applications.

Another theme involves administrative applications. Considerations include whether to offer online course enrolment, promote "paperless" meetings, and so forth.

Finally, person-to-person communication has become an increasingly bothersome theme, too, as the sheer volume of messages rises. For example, many staff experience stress and even start to feel overwhelmed by the growing number of e-mails they receive.

Failure to address the issues raised by these different types of proposals adds to the burden faced by IT staff who must deploy and support new technologies or prevent problems from arising. Not tackling technology problems early means longer hours for IT staff who must cope with the growing consequences. Novel technologies in particular prompt various issues across campus that IT staff can't always resolve unaided.

Issues Affecting Novel Uses of Technology

Novel uses of technology always have human resource issues associated with them. For example, consider the provision by instructors of lecture notes, assignments, and other materials on the university intranet. The IT department could support these services using a groupware product or university web site or both, or a virtual learning environment. Deploying such a facility is just one step, however, no matter how time-consuming or complicated; getting instructors and students to use it effectively is another challenge, yet their failure to do so adds to the support demanded of IT staff. The university president might

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be particularly keen for students to have online access to all lecture notes, but how strongly can the president request that instructors comply?

As another example, consider telephony. A university usually wants to minimize voice communication costs, which can be substantial. A multi-campus university in particular is likely to use extensive voice communication between campuses. Thought has to be given to using voice over the Internet instead of the telephone. This would necessitate equipping each staff PC with a microphone and the necessary software. How do managers ensure that administrative staff, who have the greatest need to communicate by voice, use the cheaper option rather than resorting to the telephone? Not only must the IT staff equip them properly for the switch, they must learn how to use the technology.

As if the pace of adoption of new technology were not enough, network administrators and other IT staff have to prevent users and outsiders from abusing the network, whether through illegal downloads, hacking attacks, phishing attacks, or overuse of bandwidth for

entertainment purposes. They also must prevent the theft of IT equipment.

Potential Problems with IT Staff Workloads

Excessive IT staff workloads can cause several problems, so managers must take care that staff are not continually overstretched. The IT support actually available to students should not contradict what is said in the marketing literature, for example. IT support is supposed to be customer-oriented, so IT staff must have sufficient time to focus on these human issues or run the risk of increasing student and faculty complaints about IT service.

Salaries for the IT staff must be competitive to attract persons of the right caliber. Low pay contributes to difficulties in employee recruitment and retention. Turnover is not only expensive, it causes stress among remaining staff and lowers the support levels the IT department can deliver.

One factor leading to long hours for IT staff is the lengthy periods for which IT services are available. In the case of computer labs, this could be 15 hours per day or longer. Network access is continuous.

In network administration, tasks crop up without warning, requiring immediate attention. Due to pressure of work, IT staff may feel they have no option but to work from home even when campus buildings are closed. Occasionally staff have to work late hours to fix problems such as system breakdowns or to meet the continual requirements for faculty and student support.

How to Help Break the Overwork Pattern

How can network administrators and other computing staff help themselves when their time is already fully occupied? With competing demands, it is important that they become proficient in time management if they aren't already. Attendance at training events and reading of job-related literature is rarely possible, however. Nonetheless, the university would benefit from supporting directly applicable professional development of IT staff. It would be intolerable, of course, for staff to spend time at work studying for a PhD or unrelated degree and then claim to be overloaded, but clear policies should prevent abuse of a professional development program.

Computing and networking staff can reduce their workload by purchasing off-the-shelf-products. This approach bears the risk that the relevant university staff will have limited knowledge of the university's applications and systems and must resort to contacting the suppliers when a problem arises. In addition, the potential delays and costs of seeking outside help can reflect badly on the IT department. Nonetheless, this outsourcing of computer systems implementation and support is a common solution to staffing shortfalls and often works well. It does not address the underlying problem, however, which is a staffing resource issue.

How can the human resources department help? Senior university managers might believe that staff, particularly managers, are required to undertake extra work to get the job done, but staff must not be made to feel that workloads are excessive, even abusive. The extent to which management expects IT staff to work unsociable hours should be clarified. Overtime could be formally acknowledged either financially or by days off in lieu. Part of the IT job requires staff to plan ahead—they must arrange to work during quiet periods to complete otherwise disruptive tasks, and they have to plan when to take their annual leave. Having days off in lieu would assist them in planning and in maintaining a work-life balance. The HR department can aid in drawing up appropriate policies.

A possibility for limiting hours worked by staff is to state an upper limit. The HR department could work more closely with managers if excessive overtime is suspected. HR must proactively try to identify workaholics and others in danger of infringing working-time regulations and counsel them appropriately. An awareness campaign about sensible working hours could be initiated. The HR department must give guidance on various legally mandated limits: the total number of hours worked per week; the gap between finishing one day's work and commencing the following day's work; the number of weeks per year of paid holiday; the number of days off over a set period (for example, one day a week); the number of hours away from work per day; the number and size of rest periods per day. There must be uninterrupted periods of time when employees are not at their employer's disposal. On-site "on call" is a kind of working time. How off-site "on call" is handled needs to be agreed and communicated. Perhaps only the actual call-outs would be counted as working time. Employers must ensure that workers are encouraged to take breaks. Finally, "rolling up" holiday pay instead of taking the time off work should be strongly discouraged.

How can IT managers help? To avoid workload problems, the IT manager could consider identifying the minimum levels of service that senior management would find acceptable. Another idea is to have a mechanism whereby additional short-term staff could be recruited to cover absences due to holidays, ill health, and other shortfalls in staffing levels.

Determining the optimal size of an IT services department can be difficult, but a manager could start by finding out how many IT services staff are employed by similarly sized campuses. EDUCAUSE, for example, publishes survey results that summarize information from hundreds of university IT departments, mainly in the United States (the EDUCAUSE Core Data Service, http://www.educause.edu/cds/).

IT managers must take note if their staff regularly work unsociable hours or communicate by e-mail outside of normal campus hours. Managers should determine whether customer-support demands are behind the overtime. If they are, IT managers should make sure users know what they can reasonably expect of IT services staff during unsociable hours. This information can be communicated in a document describing service levels and times.

An IT manager should also suspect something amiss if staff regularly send e-mails at all sorts of unsociable hours. Some individuals are workaholics and work excessive hours even though no pressure has been put on them to do so. IT managers must attempt to detect and correct this sort of behavior, both for the employee's and the university's welfare.

A university does not want to reach a situation where staff are keen to do a good job but have insufficient time in which to do it. In this case staff might feel that they have to spend long hours working. When staff raise issues about feeling overworked or stressed because of work demands, IT managers must do something about the underlying problems. Ideally, we want staff to love their jobs. A good working environment with reasonable time demands and clear policies not only meets legal obligations and manages user expectations, it reduces IT staff stress and turnover. Both the IT department and university benefit when well-trained staff serve the campus community reliably and effectively. *e*

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