Social networks of the electronic variety have become thoroughly embedded in contemporary culture. People have woven these networks into their daily routines, using Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, online gaming environments, and other tools to build and maintain complex webs of professional and personal relationships.

CIOs likewise have recognized the importance of building social networks, using not only these electronic tools but also the old-fashioned methods of face-to-face communication and relationship-building. Today, establishing these networks is more important than ever in order to manage changes in technology and expectations in the current economy. Sharing information and developing a common understanding with campus partners have become keys for success in IT organizations.

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How did this happen? Just over a decade ago, one of the benefits of going to college was gaining access to IT resources; yet today’s students bring a complex IT environment with them to campus, and their expectations about connectivity and service run very high. Moreover, the dependencies on information technologies are hardly limited to students; nearly every facet of campus life relies on some form of technology. Faculty incorporate increasingly sophisticated technologies into the classroom to supplement lectures, complete course assignments, and measure learning outcomes. Administrators are replacing paper files and legacy systems with enterprise applications and automated workflow. The IT infrastructure has become as important to the campus as any other utility. If forced to choose, some on campus might even prioritize e-mail or network access over lights and heat.

Such dependencies have increased the pressure on IT organizations, a situation further exacerbated by the current economic downturn. Between shortfalls in staff and freezes in hiring, there is a renewed emphasis on technology solutions, including the need for IT organizations to demonstrate greater efficiencies and help with “green” solutions campus-wide. Faculty incorporate increasingly sophisticated technologies into the classroom to supplement lectures, complete course assignments, and measure learning outcomes. Administrators are replacing paper files and legacy systems with enterprise applications and automated workflow. The IT infrastructure has become as important to the campus as any other utility. If forced to choose, some on campus might even prioritize e-mail or network access over lights and heat.

The IT Communication Landscape
What does this mean for campus IT organizations? To successfully align the goals and objectives of the IT organization with those of the institution, IT leaders are devoting more time to understanding the work of other divisions and to developing stronger relationships with key players in divisions across the campus. Attention to these relationships is time well invested, since it helps to recast the IT organization from the role of commodity services provider to that of strategic partner. Building any meaningful partnership hinges on a solid foundation of trust and understanding, and relationships with campus constituents are no different. By helping others to leverage technology to their advantage, IT organizations can enable campus divisions to be more successful.

Being a good partner depends, in part, on technical knowledge and expertise. But there is another aspect, one that is conceptually simple but potentially complicated in its execution: communication. Good communication is one of the most important elements of the human network infrastructure, yet until recently, it has often been overlooked as a central ingredient in successful IT organizations. In a 2008 essay, Philip Goldstein named some of the emerging roles open to IT professionals, including orchestrator, process architect, and proactive strategist. Communication is arguably at the heart of all of these roles, as is active listening. Yet sharing complex technical information in a manner that is easy for laypeople to understand can prove to be very challenging for IT professionals. When IT leaders emphasize the importance of soft skills, good communication and active listening are more likely to become ingrained in the organizational culture.

A New Approach
The communications makeover of IT organizations begins with understanding the higher education landscape and moving inward in concentric circles. IT leaders have long been knowledgeable about higher education, including government policy, finances, and the competitive outlook; now, the importance of broad generalist knowledge is filtering lower in the organization. Moving inward, IT leaders and staff must also understand their own institutions. A thorough reading of the campus strategic plan is a good place to begin; institutional blogs, websites, student newspapers, and HR and other employee newsletters are also useful sources of information and are helpful in identifying trends, understanding issues, and discerning the campus culture.

Another good way to learn about the campus and start building relationships is through participation in presidential task forces and other kinds of institution-wide committees. These activities offer an opportunity to meet and interact with a broad cross-section of campus leaders and to better understand important issues facing the institution. IT professionals who participate in these activities can help provide institutional leadership while representing the IT organization and demonstrating organizational commitment to the greater campus community. Further, as community stakeholders, IT professionals need not be confined solely to IT matters. Broad issues—ranging from work-life balance...
of the creative ways that IT organizations are facilitating these discussions with various campus partners:

- Information Technology Services at the University at Albany, State University of New York, has developed a variety of stakeholder groups to provide the IT organization with ongoing feedback from various constituencies, including faculty and student advisory boards, a policy review board, and an information security council. These forums provide the IT organization with ample opportunities to learn how customers are utilizing IT services, to determine how well those services are working, and to solicit input on a variety of IT issues. Participants are invited to put items on the agenda, thereby raising issues and addressing concerns of their choosing. This open forum helps the IT organization better understand how customers value its services, find out what new technologies are the most interesting to them, and gain valuable input for policy and strategic planning and evaluation purposes.

- Information Technology at Rice University initiated a “Conversations with IT” series aimed at learning clients’ specific needs and concerns. As part of this dialogue, IT staff hosted meetings in each of the primary academic buildings, with a broad call for participation. These open sessions were focused on listening to customers’ concerns rather than on following an IT-based agenda. The discussions yielded solutions on a variety of issues, from gaining reliable access to plotter-printers to obtaining a site license for SPSS. Furthermore, relationships with department and faculty leaders developed, leading to increased support for IT initiatives.

- Various strategies are employed to discern the IT-related needs of students at Washington and Lee University. Leaders from Information Technology Services (ITS) meet periodically with the student Executive Committee, and students also serve on the Information Technology Advisory Committee. ITS conducted a detailed survey of the student body in the spring of 2009, yielding a 30 percent response rate and nearly forty pages of comments. ITS summarized the survey results in posters and web pages and will report back to students on progress toward the needs expressed by the survey respondents.

In all of these dialogues, IT professionals must first take great care to listen. Second, they should not try to solve problems too quickly, following the old admonition of “seek first to understand, then to be understood.” They should ask questions about the clients’ needs and requirements and workflows and about the clients’ pressures and challenges, and again, they should be prepared to fully understand those before jumping to potential solutions. Although this can be quite a challenge, those who master these skills will learn a great deal about how the IT organization supports and interacts with the campus community. This information can be invaluable in making
improvements to IT services and overall planning efforts. Follow-through is critical: without resolution of some of the customers’ concerns, IT organizations stand to lose credibility and minimize campuswide participation in the future.

The key for these and other discussions is to proceed in a way that is culturally appropriate for the institution and to leverage existing committees and governance structures when possible. The attitude of the IT organization in these discussions is also critical. Focusing on the clients’ needs and displaying patience in fully understanding the context and the nature of the problems can help open both hearts and purse strings.

As Steve Bragg, the former vice president for finance and planning at Illinois State University, has noted, the key to successful funding proposals from the IT organization is not a description of all the technical bells and whistles but, instead, is a simple, clear explanation of how the funding proposals will meet the goals and objectives of the institution.

By following these communication principles and strategies, IT organizations can lay the groundwork for effective solutions. For instance, during the summer of 2009, Information Technology Services at Washington and Lee University identified a pattern of requests, from various units, for digital signs. At the same time, network-based solutions for digital signs had proliferated, presenting the opportunity of offering a unified solution to meet the needs of the entire university. The IT organization initiated discussions between stakeholders—including Dining Services, the University Store, Student Affairs, and other offices—concerning a common solution. By pursuing a unified solution, the IT organization created an opportunity for simplified and scalable support to satisfy a broad campus need.

Yet defining a project and beginning work does not end the necessity for effective communication. Project management involves its own set of communication requirements, especially as IT organizations take on increasingly complex projects involving a variety of stakeholders and legal requirements. Communication begins with clarity in defining the project and its outcomes. The project lead must be diligent to communicate continuously with stakeholders, especially when challenges arise such as budgetary constraints, unexpected technical difficulties, and/or changing needs of clients. IT organizations that become enamored with certain technical solutions or that proceed in a heads-down manner to accomplish the project objectives may expend considerable effort but still fail to satisfy the client in the end. IT must be clear with clients about its capabilities and its limitations, constantly making good-faith attempts to help connect clients with solutions. The success of a project is determined not by the IT organization’s completion of its checklist but, rather, by the client’s perception that success, as measured against its needs and expectations, has been achieved.

The business community and resources such as the Project Management Institute (http://www.pmi.org) are a good source of information about project management and related issues of communication. Workshops and panels on project management have become increasingly common at IT conferences, helping to focus attention on communication, negotiation, organization, and other skills needed to manage the new and complex projects that IT organizations are increasingly called on to manage.

The Emerging IT Communications Field

For many CIOs and IT vice presidents, changing the way that IT organizations communicate with the rest of the campus community is reflected in changes and/or additions in staff. A growing number of institutions have hired staff to help spearhead IT communication efforts. Job responsibilities may include anything from writing content for newsletters and the web to developing templates for various communications strategies and managing successful relationships with other campus divisions. Some institutions have the resources to implement an IT communications team, whereas other institutions may have only one person, perhaps not even a full-time position, who manages various aspects of IT communication.

Where do these IT communications professionals come from? In many cases, the role has been assumed by technical staff who have a knack for conveying information in ways that are easy for non-tech-savvy customers to understand. In other cases, CIOs and IT vice presidents have specifically sought out individuals who do not have a technical background. In all cases, one of the primary responsibilities of these IT communications professionals is to serve as “translators”
to the campus community, ensuring that
technology information is conveyed in
ways that are clear, concise, and easy to
understand.

Over the past five years, these com-

munications professionals have become
an increasingly visible presence across
IT organizations. Yet as vital as their role is, this is a new field that is still gaining recognition—in a challenging economy. As communication becomes more im-
portant to successful IT strategies and
relationships, IT communications pro-

professionals find themselves needing to do
more with less, just like everyone else in
the IT organization. It isn’t hard to imag-

ine that with additional resources, more
CIOs and IT vice presidents would seek
to invest in building the soft skills of
the IT workforce.

The specific duties of IT communica-
tions professionals vary and can include
marketing, relationship management, and
project consulting/management. Some IT
organizations define the role of these IT
professionals as pertaining strictly to cam-

pus communications in the form of e-mail,
print, and web delivery. In other IT organi-

dations, the communication role may entail
broader responsibilities, such as managing
relationships with other campus divisions
or providing technical advice. And when
campus divisions want to employ vendor-
hosted solutions, some IT organizations
will choose consulting as part of an overall
strategic planning process because they
believe this is the way they can be most
helpful to their customers; in such cases,
IT communications professionals can play
a very important consulting role to ensure
that compatibility, security, and functional-
ity are fully addressed and properly man-
aged by the vendor.

The shape of these roles depends on
a variety of factors, including the size
and culture of an institution and the
backgrounds of IT staff. At a smaller
institute, an IT staff member with re-

sponsibility for the departmental website
could also be charged with broader
communication responsibilities as well as
policy formulation and management of
projects requiring interdepartmental col-

laboration. At a larger institution, a staff
member’s time could be devoted exclu-
sively to crafting messages, formulating
communication strategies, and working
with advisory groups and other key con-
stituencies. Position titles of professionals
involved in IT communications suggest
the wide variety of possible approaches:

- Lead IT Consultant
- Director of Communications and
  Marketing
- Communications Coordinator for
  Information Technical Services
- IT Customer Relations Manager
- Director of Strategic Communications
  and Planning
- Assistant CIO for Policy and
  Communications

Challenges
The difficulties associated with good
communication cannot be overstated. In
many respects, every IT professional rep-

resents the face of the IT organization to
the rest of the campus. In a perfect world,
all IT staff would excel in all communica-
tion skills. This suggests the need to en-
hance interpersonal and communication
skills across the entire organization, but
especially among IT leaders, managers,
and staff who interact with the public.

Customer relations training can help
accomplish this purpose, as can an organi-
zational culture that values soft skills.

Knowing that a single bad impression can
torpedo the best strategy, many IT leaders
are promoting positive communication
as the responsibility of every IT profes-
sional. As a result, IT staff must become
skilled at responses that are friendly and
open and that achieve a balance between
the two extreme reactions to requests: (1)
“No, we’re too busy, and it can’t be done”;
or (2) “Yes, whatever you say” (The latter,
sanguine response typically backfires
when the client isn’t realistically informed
of IT limitations and capabilities.)

Learning how to speak in “plain Eng-
lish” may be one of the biggest hurdles
that IT professionals must overcome. The mystique associated with acronyms,
jargon, and technical details can set tech-
nical staff apart as a distinctive group of
professionals, but it can also alienate oth-
ers. As information technology has be-

come ubiquitous, people have acquired
the ability to manage their own IT experi-
cence. As a result, IT consumers now have
higher expectations about understanding
the technology and less patience with
terminology and explanations that they
don’t understand. For IT professionals at
colleges and universities, this means that
others on campus must be able to under-
stand, without too much difficulty, the
information being shared.

The need to communicate well is not
limited to helping customers resolve indi-

vidual problems; it is also a critical factor
in the success of engaging the campus
community to help leverage the value of
information technology to benefit the
institution. IT leaders face an increas-
ing number of service issues that could
dramatically affect the campus.

Tools of the Trade
The growing IT communications
profession offers a plethora of op-
tions to assist IT organizations with
the communication process. Mem-
bers of the EDUCAUSE ITCOMM
Constituent Group (http://www.
ducause.edu/groups/ITCOMM)
are working together to address “the
challenge that IT professionals and
organizations face in communicat-
ing strategically and clearly to user
communities, internal and external
constituencies, campus leadership
and within the IT organization itself.

Topics for discussion are broad,
ranging from best practices and
lessons learned to feedback and/or
deconstruction of communiqués written by participants.” As institu-
tions develop templates, tools, and
protocols to help retain consistency
and identify audiences and meth-
ods of delivery (e.g., Washington
and Lee University’s Audiences and
Channels Grid and the University at
Albany’s IT Communications Plan),
these “tools of the trade” can be
posted to the ITCOMM wiki (http://
itcommunicate.wetpaint.com/).
The ITCOMM Constituent Group
can be a valuable asset not only for
IT communications profession-
als but also for IT organizations
seeking to improve cross-campus
communication.
Institutions that are moving to virtualized environments, considering cloud computing, and evaluating new collaboration strategies will make better decisions if they have ongoing input from the campus community. The role of the network in delivering these vital services could also be represented to students via externally hosted services. Photographs of students using laptops in a variety of settings and survey data demonstrating that wireless connectivity is a paramount concern for students will be far more effective than detailed descriptions of routers and wireless access points. An illustration of cloud computing could include images of music and art collections of routers and wireless access points. Institutions that are moving to virtualized environments, considering cloud computing, and evaluating new collaboration strategies will make better decisions if they have ongoing input from the campus community. At the same time, these issues need to be framed in ways that all constituents will understand. In such cases, it is not technical details but, rather, explanations of the big picture, of the pros and cons from a customer's perspective, and of changes in service delivery that will likely inspire participation across the campus.

For some people, translating technical details into simple prose is easy and natural; for others, it is quite difficult. But IT professionals need to realize that a strategy for interacting successfully across the campus community depends, in part, on the organization's ability to converse in terms that can be understood by all. For example, a presentation to the college or university board of trustees about the need to fund network infrastructure should incorporate words and images that are familiar and relevant to that audience. Photographs of students using laptops in a variety of settings and survey data demonstrating that wireless connectivity is a paramount concern for students will be far more effective than detailed descriptions of routers and wireless access points. An illustration of cloud computing could include images of music and art collections and other teaching tools available to students via externally hosted services. The role of the network in delivering these vital services could also be represented pictorially. Comparative data from peer institutions on institutional funding of the network could be presented in tables and graphs. A presentation targeted to the interests and backgrounds of the audience can yield the desired result—in this case impressing on trustees the importance of funding network infrastructure to support vital communication, teaching, research, and learning needs.

The IT organization must learn to speak in the language of the various constituencies it serves. For the admissions office, this means talking about yield rates; for the development office, about annual funds, capital campaigns, and planned giving; for academic departments, about tenure and promotion, service learning, and general education requirements. Anyone who has traveled to a foreign country knows that attempting to use the local language can make a considerable difference in creating a receptive attitude. Even if mastery of the language is imperfect, listeners usually appreciate the effort.

Finally, although good relationships will thrive in an environment of shared understanding and common language, IT professionals must exercise caution in how they frame discussions. It can be very tempting to jump quickly to technical solutions, for both technical and nontechnical staff. But the proliferation of alternative, vendor solutions provides ample opportunity for other campus divisions to engage in “one-stop shopping” for products that claim to get the job done without much support from the campus IT organization. As IT professionals know all too well, this is rarely the case, especially when these solutions rely on the use of protected information about members of the campus community. When IT organizations have good relationships with other campus divisions and frame discussions appropriately, they are more likely to be invited to the table earlier, where they can fully explore all available solutions.

Conclusion

Although electronic tools for social networking have introduced a new dimension to communication, certain fundamentals remain. The central tenets of social networking are sharing information and building and sustaining relationships. The tools or mechanisms for facilitating communication may change, but the underlying need for social interaction remains a powerful aspect of human nature.

These elements of social networking lend themselves nicely to the IT higher education context. Good communication is the key ingredient in building relationships with constituencies across the campus. Those relationships, in turn, are essential to creating new roles for IT organizations as they transform themselves from managers of well-defined commodity services to facilitators of complex solutions that require a deep understanding of clients' needs and, frequently, integration of campus and third-party resources and tools. Regardless of the technical challenges faced by IT professionals, the ongoing requirement to partner with the campus community will continue to require good communication.

Notes