A Practical Solution to After-Hours Computer Support
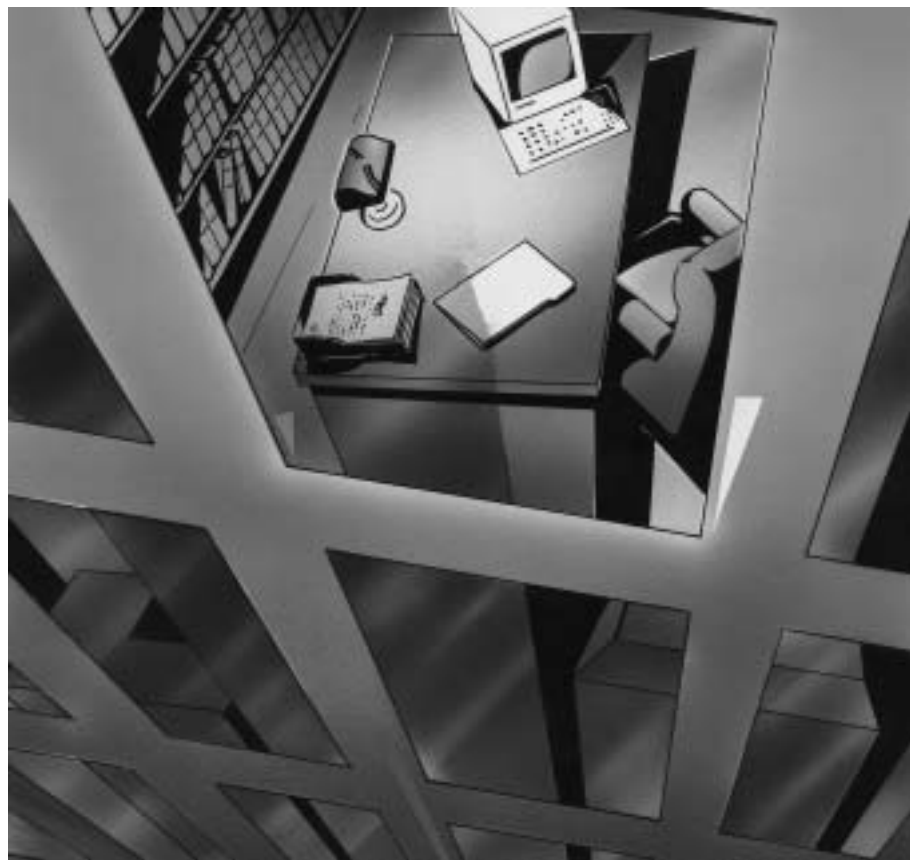
Students and staff using their computers in the evening, when the daytime help desk is closed, needn't feel abandoned

By **Debbora Bartel Quayle**

If Murphy's Law had its way, students would encounter computer problems only after the help desk had closed for the day. However, most campuses find that only a small percentage of their problems arise after hours. Nevertheless, those that do occur can frustrate a student who has no one to speak to until the next morning. This is true also for employees who work late, often trying to meet important deadlines.

At Hamilton College, the solution was to implement a student-run help desk called Help@Night and an in-room technical support service called Support On Site (SOS). Both units are staffed by students with an appropriate level of technical expertise. Together, these services function much like the daytime help desk.

Hamilton is a small residential campus in central New York serving 1,700 students. Since 1995, when the college was first connected to the Internet, we've seen a steady and significant increase in students' use of technology, calls to the help desk, and the number of messages left for us overnight. Our initial response was to provide in-room assistance during the first few weeks of the semester, when demand was highest. Student interns, coordinated through the IT network services team, provided on-site help, which was limited to network connectivity issues. Although this service was valuable, we quickly discovered that students' problems weren't neatly limited to network issues or daytime hours.

Help@Night

Before launching the after-hours Help@Night call-in service, we conducted a campus-wide survey. From previous customer satisfaction surveys, we knew our users preferred a help desk staffed with full-time, professional technical support personnel, but for various reasons this wasn't an option for evening hours. We wanted to learn whether our users would accept students in this role for after-hours support. In the absence of an after-hours professional help desk, respondents preferred students over the nonhuman options offered (Web-based support, knowledge bases, e-mail or mailing list support, and so on).

To properly size the Help@Night service, we estimated demand by counting the number of messages left overnight. The result suggested that after-hours call volume would be approximately

10 percent of daytime volume, but our survey showed that low utilization didn't mean the service would have low value. Most of us rarely need a hospital emergency room, yet we place great value on its availability. An after-hours help desk offering emergency technical service provides similar value.

Four students make up the Help@Night team, but because the projected call volume is low, only one student is on duty at a time. Operating hours are 4 p.m.–10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday. All evening calls are logged with the same call-tracking software the daytime staff uses (Track-It! by BlueOcean). This lets the daytime staff monitor the quality of the Help@Night service, compile statistics, distribute caller satisfaction surveys, and identify the Help@Night staff's strengths and weaknesses. To ensure continuity between day and evening services, and to increase its value to college employees, Help@Night provides support for the same hardware and software as the daytime service.

Support On Site

Our response to the need for increased in-room support was to completely revamp the student network support function. First, we moved it from under the network services team and had it report to the daytime help desk. Next, we lengthened service availability from just the first few weeks to the entire semester. Finally, we expanded SOS to cover all computer problems, not just those related to network connectivity.

Either the daytime support staff or Help@Night assigns student work orders to the three or four interns hired to provide in-room support. To collect work orders, SOS interns log into Track-It! via the Web. This way they can log results and collect new work orders at any time and from anywhere on campus. They are responsible for contacting the caller to arrange a mutually convenient appointment (day or night). This flexibility in work hours is often attractive to busy upperclass students, who also tend to have the desired technical experience. SOS interns' earnings will fluctuate,

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depending on how many problem calls they are assigned. In the past, we guaranteed four hours' pay to make it worthwhile when call assignments were low, but we are about to change to a bonus system instead.

SOS interns receive work order assignments on the basis of how many jobs are in the work queue. Interns can increase their earnings through efficiency (by handling more work orders), or they may "think like consultants" and offer additional support when warranted. Bonus awards depend on whether they meet or exceed call-handling expectations.

Each SOS intern carries a kit designed to help troubleshoot and fix problems while they are on site. For example, they may carry a low-end network jack tester, an extra length of cable, our network installation CD, and a CD of common hardware drivers. They are responsible for their kits and pay for any lost or damaged components. They are not authorized to install or reinstall operating systems, nor may they open a student's computer. If the SOS intern cannot resolve a student's problem, the student is advised to take his or her computer to Hamilton's on-site fee-based repair service.

Operating Efficiencies

Before taking calls on their own, SOS and Help@Night interns receive on-the-job training by shadowing a more experienced intern. They also receive coaching from the professional staff. A professional staff member monitors the logs daily to ensure that both services are operating efficiently and that there are no omissions or errors. Customer satisfaction surveys for both services are e-mailed to callers biweekly. This year, at the end of their service visit, SOS interns will hand out a card with the URL for our online satisfaction survey. This helps us continually improve the service and provides student employees with valuable feedback.

Unlike distributed technical support models (for example, interns in each residence hall), the Help@Night service supports students and employees cost-effectively because it functions more like a centralized, professional help desk. It employs only a few students, and there are no costs associated with room-and-board incentives. The Help@Night interns share a workstation used by daytime interns. To further reduce costs, SOS interns use their own computers to receive and log work orders.

SOS and Help@Night let us serve students when they are more likely to be using their computers (in the evening), with a minimal investment in staff and equipment. The Help@Night service also satisfies the needs of college employees who may be working late.

Real-World Experience

Interns gain real-world experience. The Help@Night job is designed to give them experience closely matching that of a professional help desk, and the SOS job is designed to give interns experience resembling that of a consultant.

The daytime help desk staff benefits by having fewer overnight messages to respond to in the morning. The Information Technology Services (ITS) department benefits because the service generates a positive image. Users may not call after hours very often, but the service's availability has made a lot of people very happy. The ITS department stands out as one of the few college departments offering after-hours support.

We may not have repealed Murphy's Law, but with these services we think we have at least removed some of its bite. *e*

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