

# Maximizing Student Teams to Support IT

*The TWIST project takes advantage of student teams to enhance, expand, and complement the IT organization*

By **Lisa Caughron**

Illinois Wesleyan University created the Trust the Wisdom in Student Teams (TWIST) project to develop student teams into essential components of IT support. This article explains how and why to apply the TWIST concepts.

## Initial Considerations

Is a student team a good choice to meet your IT support requirements? You need to consider several things, both from a supervisory perspective and from that of the job's function:

- Regular turnover
- Vesting students in the job
- Jobs appropriate for students
- Managing student staff

With student teams, members leave regularly. On the positive side, you continually acquire new skill sets and with them new ideas, new strengths, and the opportunity to progressively steer your team to meet ever-changing technology needs. Conversely, you lose some staff just when they become valuable. Despite the increased work involved in supervising student teams, the opportunities far outweigh the negatives.

Because students are temporary employees, getting them vested in their jobs requires a different approach from that for regular IT staff. Student staff are (1) in a new environment (away from home), (2) have a four-year plan or vision, and (3) consider college a transition stage.

You should strategically position the job as a bridge between child/adult and student/professional. To encourage vest-

ing, you must help student team members understand that the skills acquired will increase the potential for success in their careers by providing them with relevant experience and solid, professional references. Students vest when they perceive something important (or enjoyable) in it for them. Convince them there is.

What jobs are suitable for students, and how do you make that determination? Consider first how long it would take to learn a particular skill (or skill set). Can written or verbal guidance teach staff to perform a task? If such training is possible in a semester or less, that job might be appropriate for a student.

Why consider students as staff? They are inquisitive, eager to learn and be challenged, and appreciative of rewards. Also, students in teams I manage have come up with solutions to problems our technical staff did not have time to develop.

Managing students involves creativity and a willingness to tweak situations as you go (some things work for some teams and not for others). Showcase their successes. Troubleshoot the problems. Managing students effectively and developing finely honed teams can be a rewarding challenge.

Achieving consistency within your student teams requires consistency on your part. You must provide stable (and available) leadership, excellent communication (positive as well as "change" feedback), and clear, well-defined, reasonable expectations.

## The Team Theory

"A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable," stated Katzenbach and Smith in their book, *The Wisdom of Teams*. They contended that virtually all of the teams they had "met, read [about], heard about, or been members of" ranged from 2 to 25 people. They



further asserted that groups larger than that have “trouble interacting constructively as a group, much less agreeing on actionable specifics.” The greater the number of members in a team, the greater the level of difficulty in overcoming real issues such as communication and personality differences, and in creating a mechanism within which members function in orchestration with one another.<sup>1</sup>

Based on this definition, clearly a team is not a collection of same-skilled people performing the same task. A team provides a more comprehensive approach to meeting a common goal. Some might view computer repair as an individual activity, for example. Broadening the purpose to increase customer satisfaction, provide computer service and repair, and reduce/eliminate computers returned for similar problems requires a team approach. Skills needed include the ability to communicate with non-technical clients, communicate in a technical manner, perform a standard set of tasks on each piece of equipment serviced, research and identify new issues, apply advanced computer diagnostics, and research and identify emergent issues that relate to current technology. This broader range of skills necessitates the development of a team of individuals who possess complementary skills.

Team goals are typically performance driven. Some goals may be quantitative in nature and others more qualitative. Most goals should include both aspects. Work with your team members to set goals both individually and collectively.

Teams are accountable for successes and failures. If you supervise a team, you also are accountable. Use the tools and methods available to make sure the successes outnumber the failures.

## Creating Student Teams

The first step in creating a student team is to define the team’s goals or objectives. What does the team need to accomplish? Do you need quality-of-service parameters? Are there timelines to meet and specific communication needs to accomplish goals?

Identify qualities and skills essential for the team’s success. Does the task require oral or written, technical or nontechnical communication skills? What about project management skills and the ability to work on a deadline? Assess your needs. Identify the “who, what, and how” to get the job done.

Plan for rolling success: As team members become seniors, look for second-semester freshmen to add to your team. This allows the most experienced team members to pass on important skills during a transition period. As students graduate, identify which skills you will be losing, evaluate the skills remaining, and target necessary additions to improve the team. Seek to retain a solid team by employing staff from a variety of academic levels.

How do you find team members? Ask your students for referrals. Advertise on campus (use campus job fairs, electronic forums, e-mail, bulletin boards). Keep job descriptions current. Illinois Wesleyan also documents needed skills on customized applications, asking applicants to rank their perceived level of expertise in those areas.

Last but not least, search for your team. There’s more to selecting team members than placing a general job announcement and hiring a bunch of people. You need a plan. Here are some ideas to get you going:

- Seek people with qualities and skills identified from your needs assessment.

Make sure you keep in mind your current staff, the combinations of candidates from which to select, which qualities are critically important, and which qualities are simply desirable. Create your job ads and format your interviews to focus on these skills and qualities.

- Use your students as resources.

Go over the job qualifications with them—it is amazing how listening to qualities and skills (especially when you include “soft” skills) brings someone to mind. We also contact TAs and computer science faculty about job openings and ask for referrals.

- Seek those with complementary skills.

Remember, you want to build a robust group of individuals who can work together to accomplish a desired goal.

- Add depth to your team.

How many CIOs could redesign the institutional Web sight or configure LDAP with their campus portal? Not many. They hire Webmasters, network managers, sys admins, and so forth—to add depth to their existing breadth of knowledge and expertise.

- Always do job interviews.

If you seek help desk employees, phone interviews are an important way to tell if prospective employees can communicate effectively on the phone. When doing personal interviews, always pull in your team lead to assist. This allows them to develop interview skills and puts part of the responsibility for selecting additional team members on their shoulders, which encourages them to select fellow team members from a different perspective (“we” chose versus “they” chose).

When interviewing, use “team” language: “What skills/talents do you have that would strengthen our team?” Speak clearly about your lofty expectations for those you choose to hire, communicating that this job matters. Contributions will be expected.

If you work with students and student teams, there is no room for fear or insecurity. I have seen entire systems fail because managers would not hire staff whose knowledge surpassed their own, nor would they allow their staff to develop advanced skills. Teams thrive from bringing together the best of the best and challenging them to work together, work better, and develop into a powerfully functioning, superior phenomenon.

## Developing Students and Student Teams

In moving your student team from the “financially attractive” mode to the “essential components of IT support” mode, develop, develop, develop!

First, identify potential leaders. Leaders rarely jump up and wave at you. I have had quiet leaders (from whom others sought advice on a regular basis) who were difficult to spot. After you’ve

identified potential leaders, work with them. Evaluate their ability to envision how their team fits into different scenarios and to make appropriate suggestions. Those abilities can be developed further and will help them become more valuable leaders.

Seek your team leader's input with respect to other team members (identify strengths and weaknesses). Help team leaders identify ways to focus on strengths and improve weaknesses. Recently, my team leader and I identified a team member who had great communication skills (and decent leadership potential) along with a tendency to promise too much and an inability to deliver. We created an assignment using those skills by requiring regular communication with clients. When promised results were not delivered, a very awkward situation resulted for the team member. Almost immediately we saw a double-positive result: enhanced communication with clients and elimination of a negative behavior. My team leader also learned how to use a team member's strength to eliminate or reduce a weakness.

Use "student appropriate" methods. Team members are often inquisitive, excitable, and motivated; at a crossroad leading to the rest of their lives; and in need of guidance to make positive changes and progress. Capitalize on their strengths and nurture their development.

Teach your students from the beginning that this is not a regular job. It is more than showing up to sit at a desk and do homework. If you do *your* job when you hire them, they will already know this. Expect outstanding output and input from each team member and communicate those expectations. Create opportunities for them and challenge students to contribute in positive ways. Teach them to work independently as well as with their fellow team members. Challenge them to think, act, contribute, and view their work as important.

As a supervisor, identify resources for your staff. Use sharing information with staff as a mechanism for additional communication. When a staff member shares new information, cutting-edge



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techniques, and emergent issues that affect your area, make sure you share the information with the rest of the team as well as with the appropriate professional staff.

Facilitate group communication. Students will be attending classes, not working a 40-hour week—providing ways for team members to communicate among themselves and with you is vital. Sometimes multiple communication techniques must be employed (weekly staff meetings, e-mail, bulletin boards, instant messaging, telephone, in-person conversations). Find what works or what combination of things work—and keep tweaking as needed.

It is your responsibility as a supervisor to provide tools to facilitate growth, whether training classes, Web resources, listservs, blogs, or tech resource sites. Many students will take advantage of these opportunities on their own and might even add tools to your list. How do you encourage those who are less eager? Send excerpts and links from resources to students, and discuss how that information relates to current issues. Refer students to stories and issues that you know will directly affect their work. Assign the task of coming up with a proactive plan to address issues. Sometimes

facilitating growth is a simple matter of demonstrating how to connect a known issue with a solution.

Identify and address emergent issues. Let's discuss two types: human and situational. Human issues can range from Joe, who has begun missing his scheduled shifts, to Bill and Sue, who are having problems communicating appropriately. Human issues need to be dealt with right away. Perhaps Joe needs to adjust his schedule (fewer hours?) if his job conflicts with his success as a student. Bill and Sue may need tools or methods for communicating professionally while disagreeing on personal issues. We use mid-semester as an opportunity to reevaluate weekly schedules (sometimes classes require more time and effort than initially anticipated). By addressing human issues right away and in an up-front manner, you maintain the integrity of your student teams.

Situational issues (server down, network disruption, virus outbreak, or other technical difficulties) may present themselves in an emergent manner. Work with your student staff to quickly identify, understand the scope of, and create a plan to deal with emergent issues. When procedure deviates from normal, you have a wonderful opportunity to teach problem solving to your student teams. Solicit their input, give information-gathering assignments, and talk through the problems and possible solutions so that they understand and follow your thought processes. These exercises can provide excellent development opportunities for your student staff.

Technology changes. Methods evolve. Software gets updated. At staff meetings, our student teams review, evaluate, and make recommendations to update existing procedures. Sometimes procedures remain the same; sometimes they are refined in such a way that a new dimension of service evolves. Challenge your teams to continually look for ways to improve the existing system.

### **Communicating Values**

Communicating is difficult in and of itself. Throw in "values" and the expression takes on a new level of complexity.

Understand your staff. Why did you choose Joe for your team instead of Bob? What qualities were important to you? Would you recognize Joe if you encountered him on the street and feel comfortable talking with him? If you expect your staff to care about things that are important to you, the department, and the university, you must learn their strengths and their weaknesses and show them how much you value them.

Develop and use communication matrices. Just as learning styles vary, communication styles vary—communication methods must be varied and multilayered. Many forms of concurrent communication are required for some problems to be resolved: talking on the phone with the client, reviewing e-mailed error messages, and instant messaging the second-level support member to facilitate resolution while another coworker verbally offers additional details. Create communication matrices for your teams so they do not have to wait until the next meeting to resolve an issue or discuss a problem. Effective, layered, and dynamic communication is essential to effective teamwork.

Discuss ethical issues from various perspectives. “Professor Smith’s new personal computer is here and she wants Microsoft Office on it. Can I do that?” “We’ve moved Sam Student’s data from his old computer to his new computer, but his old computer had Microsoft Office on it and this new one doesn’t. Can we install it for him?” These are great conversation starters and can be opportunities to teach your staff about licensing agreements, how they change, and what is and is not included. It is also a way to help your student teams understand differences between what they may agree with personally and what department or university policies or regulations allow. Ethics are best taught by example. If you demonstrate solid work ethics, your teams will notice and follow suit. The converse is also true.

Ask for input—and take it. A few semesters ago, we had problems with computers coming back after we serviced and returned them. I challenged my team to identify why these comput-

ers were returning and how to stop it. They customized a CD using open source software that allowed us to run virus/malware/rootkit scans on computers and clean them more thoroughly than using traditional methods. Computers no longer return for those reasons.

It is imperative to provide your teams with opportunities for success. Success engenders initiative.

Be sincere and specific with “good job” comments. “You did a great job researching that problem and coming up with a solution. That was a tough call—you kept your cool and gave them the information they needed.” Be sincere and be specific.

Communicate honestly. Sometimes you do have to say “no.” Help your staff learn the difference between disagreeing with something and being disagreeable. They will listen more openly if you communicate with respect and honesty.

## Recognizing Achievements

An essential tool in increasing the level of student employee contributions is formally or informally recognizing achievements. Sometimes it is difficult to find student staff who will go beyond what is expected or risk sharing an idea that may or may not work. To ensure these characteristics remain alive and well in your organization, reward not only the finished product but the effort your students put into it. Thank them. Talk about their efforts to others. Create certificates of merit. Give specialty assignments. Find a way to reward their efforts.

As students move through their transition to “the real world,” they benefit from working and interacting with professional IT staff. Encourage appropriate collegiality. When they need to seek information or assist professional staff with a specialized task, encourage and support those opportunities. This allows a deeper level of communication to evolve—a “professional rapport,” if you will.

Showcasing group projects is a great way to recognize achievements. For example, when the Service & Repair team came up with the scanning solution to clean computers, the return rate

decreased significantly. We set up a session with the desktop support division of IT and showcased this project. The student team’s work was met with great approval by the professional staff. Not only did the CD project demonstrate the professionalism of our student team, it provided our professional staff with a resource they did not have time to develop themselves. It was a win-win situation.

In another example, our IT and Library Tech Lab student staff needed to become proficient with movie-making technology. To increase their interest, we put students in small groups and asked them to create a movie that would address a particular IT issue (identity theft or protecting your computer, for example) by a given deadline. A panel of IT staff viewed and judged the movies and awarded prizes for the best movie (top prize was an iPod). Were they motivated? Did they learn? Did they enjoy the project? Will we try that again? Yes!

As a manager of students and/or student teams, another motivational tool you should possess is the ability to write phenomenal recommendation letters. If you don’t know how, learn! These letters are critical to your students, whether for a job, graduate school, an internship, or a scholarship.

## Trust Student Teams to Support IT

Can students and student teams enhance, expand, and complement your IT organization? Can students be developed from mere “financially attractive options for staffing” into “essential components for IT support?” The answer to these questions is an unequivocal YES! Try a little twist on your student resources and Trust the Wisdom in Student Teams. 

### Endnote

1. J. R. Katzenbach and D. K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

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