

There's No "I" in IT

The school district's IT department typically has limited resources, time, and staff, but still can perform effectively.

By Christopher McCay



We live in a highly technical world, yet many nontechnical people still view computers as mysterious black boxes that they simply don't understand—and don't want to understand. It's advantageous for everyone in an organization to have some level of knowledge about what happens in those black boxes. But despite good intentions, all technical issues are typically handled by just a few information technology (IT) team members—hence, the catchall nature of IT in most companies and organizations and the perpetuation of the mystery of the black box.

The catchall IT shop is generally staffed in a minimal and affordable way to cover routine, daily maintenance, leaving little or no time to

educate the users or to stay current with tech updates, not to mention to handle major issues like server breakdowns or viruses. In an unlimited-budget world, we would have an IT staff large enough to enable us to be proactive and business oriented, to remain on schedule and within budget—and to have fabulous hair. In reality, however, the catchall IT experience is usually one of limited resources, never enough time, a small staff performing multiple functions—and constantly pulling out one's hair.

Wants and Needs

The one upside to this catchall experience, though, is that if you survive it, you will have an extensive skill set in a wide range of IT areas, and you will truly understand what is happening in your organization.

No matter what kind of organization you work for, the “business” wants three things from IT: empowerment, transformation, and risk management. And although that sounds simple, those goals are becoming increasingly difficult in a world where the consumerization of IT has produced a generation of self-proclaimed tech-savvy workers. The tools for empowerment and transformation are no longer all controlled by IT, and risk management has entirely new areas to deal with, such as personal machines on the network, cloud-based work-arounds for bypassing internal systems, and employees unwilling to wait for IT to make changes. Workers know what they want to work with technically, and they often just try to do it or fix it themselves.

I struggle with that tug-of-war between what business wants and what we “computer nerds” want and thrive on: control, efficiency, and being prepared for the eventual problems that working with technology always presents. IT can be viewed as a necessity for functioning, like lights and running water, but not as a driver for the work that is being accomplished.

Learning Opportunities

Those of us in IT need to find ways to provide services in a more open environment, where we have fewer security controls, and where we are among the first to know about business changes that could potentially

have a major impact on our services. Consequently, the catchall IT staff must learn to be extra creative with the resources available to us, to foster beneficial vendor relationships to lean on when needed, and to become comfortable saying, “No, we don’t know that now, but we’ll learn about it and get back to you.”

Because having specialists on a catchall team is a luxury, we have the opportunity to be creative, to learn a great deal, and to grow our careers in multiple directions and dimensions. Younger and more inexperienced IT staff members have the chance to see problem resolution in almost every IT area, and veteran staff members can use that experience to mentor others and to grow their own management skills.

As with any field, IT has its specialty areas, and climbing the skill ladder in any one of them can be challenging. With a catchall IT team, however, staff members aren’t sharpening just one skill, since a typical workday presents issues that range from setting up a new employee to addressing a virus problem, to updating the website, and—oh, yes—to fielding a question from the boss about the family’s home computers. To make it through such a day, the team must be creative. Team members must be OK with juggling multiple issues and personalities. And they must be OK with knowing that everything will not get done all at once. Triage is not just a medical skill, as any IT veteran will tell you.

Another major learning opportunity comes on days that are less busy. Those are the times for situational training sessions that help limit the “how-do-we-do-that” question from coming up in a crisis. And they are the times to delegate specific tasks to staff members—tasks that will help them develop their expertise and take some of the load off the manager’s plate.

Vendor Management

Vendor management is another key creative opportunity. Proper vendor management has many important aspects, but none more so than relationship building and specialization. The catchall IT shop is all about generalizing, but there will always be projects that require a true specialist and that won’t allow you to learn as you go because of time constraints, the urgency of the business need, or just plain complexity.

That lesson is hard to learn, but there are times when it pays to let go of the need to control a project internally and bring on a highly skilled outside professional. It’s best to start with a small project and to let the vendor know there is the possibility of a long-term relationship if all goes well. Good vendors will thrive in that kind of open environment and should be treated as an extension of your team, simply because that is what they are.

Being open with vendors leads to the side benefit of being able to use the limited available budget resources creatively. Take your project needs to several vendor teams and work with them to get the best proposal for your budget. With multiple offers, you will always find other ways to approach a problem, and working with your vendor teams to find cost savings is an excellent way to develop those relationships into true partnerships.

Learning from Mistakes

Of course, catchall IT teams are bound to make mistakes. Learning from those mistakes is the best result that can come from them, and I’ve done my share of learning. For example, in the case of new product releases, hardware upgrades, and new software rollouts, good project management practices must be followed. If you don’t have a methodology in place to deal with your project management, your projects won’t ever end. If you are shooting from the hip, you are sure to break a key system. Or you will roll out a piece of software too soon. Or you will roll it out without proper training and then spend the next year dealing with the fallout.

Here’s another example: on-the-job learning is not the same as crisis management. You do not want to hand a broken or breaking situation to someone who doesn’t know what they are doing. Using downtime to learn something new is key here. Using an emergency to try to force someone to learn is ineffective. In a crisis, an experienced person needs to step in, whether from the internal staff or from one of your vendors. The rest of the staff can move back into learning mode after the crisis has passed.

Finally, example three: keep your eye on all systems. No matter the size of the company, the IT staff is in charge of all computer systems. Take the time and money to invest in management and monitoring tools so you will never have to say “I don’t know” when someone asks if the system is down. You need to be the first to know.

The catchall IT shop is a fascinating, exhilarating, frustrating, exhausting, and ultimately amazing place to work. It can easily take years to truly understand the inner workings of any company’s systems and, of course, by then, they will all have changed.

And for those of us who have chosen to spend our days—and nights—doing this work, we wouldn’t have it any other way.

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