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Helping the Helpdesk: Resources for Technical Support Staff in Libraries

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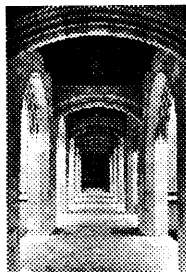
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HELPING THE HELPDESK: RESOURCES FOR TECHNICAL SUPPORT STAFF IN LIBRARIES

BY STACEY GREENWELL

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From my past experience as the sole technical support person in a public library, I hope to offer some suggestions and resources for others who may be in similar situations.

Technical support in many libraries, particularly small public libraries, can often be a solo operation. With the rapid expansion of library technology in the last decade, budgets to hire and train adequate technical support personnel have been lacking. Technical support staff may find themselves suddenly placed in a position where they feel they know too little and have too much to do. Technical support staff may often feel “unique” with their particular responsibilities; in other areas of the library such as reference or children’s services, staff may often have others to assist in sharing duties and solving problems.

So what does the solo support person do when a problem arises that is not easily solved? Read manuals? That is necessary, of course, but often the solo support person will not only be responsible for technical support activities with computer desktops, but will also be charged with the Internet connection, library website, electronic resources, and library automation system. Sometimes this extends to anything that is plugged into the wall, literally. This leaves little time for leisurely reading manuals.

In addition to lots of training and continuing education (and reading those manuals), discussion lists are an invaluable source of information. Discussion lists can be a great resource for providing suggestions, assistance, encouragement, and even a place to gripe. Why struggle for a solution to a problem when an existing solution may be an e-mail away? The experiences of others can be very beneficial—before performing an upgrade, why

not ask others about their experiences with the upgrade? Often, first-hand experience will provide information not available in manuals or help sheets or even from a product’s technical support line. Not only can the information from discussion lists be helpful, but the community from a good list can also be important, particularly for the solo support person.

DISCUSSION LISTS

I have compiled a list of some of the most useful discussion lists for technical support staff in libraries. While there are many lists that discuss various technology issues, these lists focus specifically on support in libraries.

Note: Some individuals may be more familiar with the term Listserv, which is actually a copyrighted list software product. Some e-mail discussion lists run on L-Soft Listserv, but there are other list software, such as Lyris or Majordomo. Therefore, it is best to refer to any e-mail discussion group as a discussion list.

Product-specific Lists

Many library automation systems have an e-mail discussion list available for customers as part of a users group. These lists can be essential for staff who manage these systems. My own personal experience is with Dynix-L, which is truly a great list, as many on that list are helpful, friendly and eager to share their own experiences. In addition to these, other operations, such as interlibrary loan, cataloging, or reference applications often have specific lists. These can be useful when trying to make a product perform a specific function or when trying to set up the application. The Washington Research Library Consortium has created a fairly concise list of product discussion lists at <http://www.wrlc.org/liblists>.

General Lists

Kentucky Library Association Information and Technology Roundtable (KLA-INFO)

<http://www.kylibasn.org/itrt.htm>

This is the official list of the Kentucky Library Association Information and Technology Roundtable, which is the largest of KLA's roundtables. While there is little traffic on this list, discussion of technology issues is highly encouraged. The Roundtable officers sponsor a Technology Help Desk at the KLA Annual Conference to facilitate discussion of technology. The officers hope that throughout the year this list can serve as a forum for technology issues in Kentucky libraries of all types.

Library NT (LIBNT)

<http://listserv.utk.edu/archives/libnt-l.html>

Many lists and websites devoted to WindowsNT often do not focus on the unique nature of computers in libraries. This discussion group, however, focuses on WindowsNT (and Windows 2000) issues in libraries specifically.

Public Libraries (PUBLIB and PUBLIB-NET)

<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/PubLib/index.html>

PUBLIB is a great discussion list for public librarians. While the topics range among many issues in public libraries – from book-drops to policies – the discussion often turns to technology-related issues in public libraries. Policy issues, such as filtering and computer use, are common topics, as are reservation systems, timeout software, and public computer security. PUBLIB also has a companion list, PUBLIB-NET, which focuses primarily on Internet issues. PUBLIB is certainly a higher-traffic list, but both offer useful information.

Systems Librarians (SYSLIB)

<http://listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu/archives/syslib-l.html>

A popular list for systems librarian job posts, this list also provides discussion about various technology topics in libraries. Most recently topics have focused on public computing security and website management software.