

CONVENING AN EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES WORKING GROUP IN AN ACADEMIC LIBRARY

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INTRODUCTION

Emerging technologies are impacting society at a phenomenal rate and it is almost impossible to maintain awareness of all the latest up-and-coming technologies. Not all emerging technologies are relevant to institutions of higher education or academic libraries; but based on students' expectations about technology, new modes of storing, disseminating and accessing information, and the development of new learning styles, it is imperative that alternative ways of presenting and accessing information be provided.

One area that is greatly being shaped by new technologies is library instruction. Information Services at the University of Kansas is an integration of three divisions: Networking and Telecommunication Services, Information Technology, and Libraries. Recently, Information Services combined the "technology trainers" and instruction librarians to create an Instructional Services unit. This unit has a variety of responsibilities including taking the lead in delivering and teaching information and technology skills to members of the KU community, which spans five campuses across the state of Kansas. Recently, members of the Instructional Services unit perceived a gap between possible technology needs and the eventual adoption and diffusion of appropriate solutions. This paper will discuss various questions and answers that arose during and around discussions with members of Information Services about creating and implementing an Emerging Technologies Working Group to fill that gap.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE GO AHEAD

Before an Emerging Technologies Working Group can be created, you most certainly will need to get administrative

endorsement. "Emerging Technologies" is a loaded term for many administrators and has a wide variety of political implications. Just a few of these implications include the higher level of risk associated with new technologies, roles and responsibilities, funding sources, staffing considerations, infrastructure settings, support, maintenance and preservation issues. Therefore, it is extremely important that all possible key stakeholders are identified, contacted and included. When first approaching your administration regarding the convening of an Emerging Technologies Working Group, be prepared for the possibility of resistance. Many people have varying definitions of emerging technologies and hence conflicting approaches to the creation, implementation and ultimate accountability of such a group. Organize ahead of time and have ready a rationale behind why this type of a group is important and beneficial to the library and its users. A rationale might include focusing emerging technologies on emerging services (B. Warner, Personal Communication, April 6 2006.) These would be core services which would enable the Instructional Services unit to aid and instruct more library/technology users. It is also imperative that you are very clear that the group intends to focus on user needs and enhancements, rather than on testing and implementing all of the latest fads and gadgets that students, staff and faculty are using.

There may be other areas of concern that should be discussed as well. Can the administration envision how this working group would complement broader campus learning service goals and how will this group differ from larger campus wide IT emerging technology projects? How might some of the projects an Instructional Services ET Working Group implements also impact campus IT and other units? An example of this could be the use of audio-visual tutorials on local bandwidth. Before the working group would be able to move forward, there must be administrative backing and the willingness to negotiate and collaborate with other units as needed; however, the emphasis and goal remains to aid library users in specific ways. Lastly, get your administration to create or endorse a charge for the working

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group and assist in choosing initial members. In order for your Emerging Technologies Working Group to be successful in testing, recommending and implementing emerging services, there must be full administrative support. Otherwise, the working group will not be taken seriously and any attempt to implement an emerging service might well become an exercise in frustration and futility.

CONVENING THE WORKING GROUP

After you have received the administrative 'green light' there are several issues to contemplate regarding group composition. First, think about the size of your library and, perhaps more importantly, the number of potentially interested staff. Whether you have a small or large library, there are issues to bear in mind. If you are a member of a small library, it could be relatively easy to put a group together quickly and become effective with relative ease.

However, on the flip side, it may be difficult to find enough interested and qualified staff to form an effective group. If you are a member of a large library, it could also be potentially simple to find an effectual and manageable group. On the flip side of this, however, you may have too many interested and qualified individuals. It will be incumbent upon you to determine, based on staff interest and availability, what size of a group will be effective for your purposes.

Second, ponder what kind of core group will best anchor the team. Will a select group of experts be needed? Having a 'go-to' list of potential testers and IT pros can lighten the load of the team and can provide insight that may be otherwise missed. Also, consider composing a varied core group with the possibility of forming sub or splinter groups based on the technology being reviewed and staff expertise.

How members of the core group are selected should be established by the Instructional Services unit and the administration. It may be necessary to balance the group with appointments and volunteers. Consider the type of skill sets needed by a core team. Experts and other techno-savvy staff will be important to the conversation, but neophytes and novices should not be overlooked. Technology amateurs can bring a unique and significant perspective to an emerging technologies group. They will often see things from a user perspective or see implications that experts and techie veterans no longer notice or otherwise neglect. And there is always the possibility of having a rotating membership to keep ideas fresh and avoid techno-burnout. In any case, it is a good idea to give anyone interested the opportunity to participate and contribute to the team in some way.

Once the group is selected, be clear about the goals and objectives of the group to all of the stakeholders. An emerging technologies group should strive for transparency and avoid "clique-type" behavior. Other staff and stakeholders should identify the group as an open, supportive and fun assemblage – one that will accept any idea and will work to facilitate solutions for service.

RESEARCH METHODS

Keeping abreast of emerging technologies will require a multifaceted approach and a certain level of "esprit de corps" on the part of your team. While many tools are available to assist in maintaining a knowledge base, understanding your team composition and aligning it with viable research methods and casual curiosity will make the most optimal use of the team members' time. While no one individual or small team can possibly keep up with non-adopted or emergent technologies, it is possible to devise a strategy to keep your group in the know, on a need to know basis.

Consider a two pronged approach to your research methodology. These two approaches are based on the ways in which team members and other available human resources conduct research. One approach is out of personal or professional interest while the other is out of a user need-based request. Some members of your core emerging technologies group must have a thorough understanding of the information technology professionals in your organization. Make lists of those possibly helpful IT people and what their individual areas of expertise are. This will prevent group members from spending time unearthing technology information that is uninteresting or indigestible to them. In essence these people are a "ready reference" pool should a question come up in their area. They may also be asked to serve on a specific project or in a splinter group capacity. Specific user needs will take group members deeper into the research process. Be prepared to research Information/Instructional Technology materials for solution technologies and Library Science material for other available institutional experiences and outcomes with like-type problem sets.

Tools for assisting your group in keeping abreast or delving deeper into emerging technologies instructional solutions come from a variety of both traditional and new Library Science print sources. Instructional Technology scholarly journals also address the issues surrounding technology and epistemology. Additionally, there are Web resources devoted to the use of emergent technologies in learning environments as well as conferences and seminars. Lastly, in your research tool bag, do not forget the value of play and fun because often that is where students initially set the agenda. Reference librarians provide chat service because our constituencies rely heavily on chat modes and utilities. Do not be afraid to be creative. If there are staff who want to play or learn about something they have an interest in, encourage that type of exploration, albeit within reasonable time considerations.

TESTING AND DISCUSSION

What determines an emergent technology action plan will in best practice be driven by user or staff needs. While the focus of the team may be on instructional technologies that directly impact learning, consider that collaborative tools and communication methods to support learning and services are part of the academic mission. Not only will direct requests for assistance need to be triaged, team members should also be alert to need articulations coming to them in an informal way. For example, careful listening to colleagues' complaints about a repetitive or cumbersome task process may become the catalyst for a team consultation around that particular user need.

Initial concept considerations and discussions may be standardized for fairness, efficiency and to meet administrative oversights. Standardized processes may also eliminate the need to request approvals at various points along the testing and discussion phase. As the group receives project requests initial concerns such as priority, appropriateness and security should weigh heavily. Early initial project consultation with campus security staff will save much time and energy. For example, if Perl scripts or CGI is banned on your campus, there is no need to even consider applications that utilize these means as necessities.

Not surprisingly, proof positive, successful new technology implementations have most often been accomplished through the testing modes that most closely model successful learning methods, namely “applied learning.” Once a need and an appropriate technology pairing have been identified, try having an expert splinter group run it on a small test project with real user expectations and measurable results. A very successful emerging technologies working group, “DataWorks” at the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries, actually evolved into a library department by identifying specific “need” projects and creating or deploying solutions that focused entirely on Web accessible library learning services, data interpretation and storage, and collection access enhancements (Aldrich & Stefanelli, 2006.)

IMPLEMENTATION

The ultimate goal of the team’s endeavors thus far is to get the new technology solutions that have been researched and tested diffused, implemented and adopted throughout the organization. When a winning solution appears to have been found, it is time to present findings to the administration for approval and funding. How the team chooses to approach this step will be critical to the success of the project.

There will be many considerations surrounding how group determinations and findings will be reported and presented. In most cases, the team will want to also report on projects that have not worked or were abandoned for whatever reasons. Rote accountability regarding all investigations should be written into the workflow and carried through. Diffusion of that type of information throughout the organization via a newsletter or website will go a long way toward building organizational trust for the team around a process that will most certainly seem mysterious to many.

Successful projects should be presented to your administration in such a way that its efficacy is clear and proven. Establish the need and cover all of the bases. Be sure to offer full disclosure in areas important to managers such as costs, learning curves, timelines and marketing strategies. If possible, show how the solution under consideration has been utilized at other institutions. Try to get the administration to think

outside the library walls and into the user environment (Nelson, 2005) as this is key to any service vision. Be honest about caveats and how they might be addressed. Administrators will certainly come back to the group with complaints if pertinent information was not reported which later causes problems or financial loss to the organization. Scenarios like this will lead to skepticism, apathy and possibly the dissolution of the group.

Likewise, to know when a project may be derailing is of critical importance to the success of that and all other upcoming projects. If a seemingly workable solution is being held up, as a group, have the fortitude to find out why. Obviously, organizations and institutions are also political environments that may harbor seemingly innocuous agendas which are actually poisonous barriers to service. The team’s willingness to confront these issues as a group is simply part of a long history of pioneer service to education. Disarm naysayers by being thorough, competent, honest and accountable in the workflow and presentation. Build on success by garnishing the support of users and colleagues who have benefited from the group’s team work in the past. Assess outcomes and be vocal about the group’s success!

CONCLUSION

Building a viable and vibrant emerging technologies working group in an academic library may appear to be a daunting task, but it will most certainly reap benefits not only for your organization, but for the greater library community. How new technologies can enhance learning is new territory and has often been approached in less than grounded ways. It has been recently written, “This absence of highly visible successes and best practices increases the sense of frustration and concern and leaves the institutions without a lodestar.” (Trinkle, 2005) By taking ownership of this important new gap, establishing best practices and thoughtfully informing our institutions and colleagues, a bridge can be built to the libraries of the future where technologies enhance learning by being deliberate, sustainable, transparent and quality innovations to service.

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