The Expert's Opinion

An interview with

John Suess, Director,
University Computing Services,
University of Maryland Baltimore County

An Honors University in Maryland. UMBC is a Carnegie Level II public research university serving approximately 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students pursuing baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degrees.

Interviewed by
Henry H. Emurian, Associate Editor,
Information Resources Management Journal

IRMJ: Yahoo! Internet Life magazine recently listed UMBC as one of "America's 100 Most Wired Colleges." This could only happen with the skillful management of information technology at this university. As the Director of University Computing Services, what are your general responsibilities?

Suess: My general responsibilities revolve around the basic managing responsibilities of planning, budgeting, and staffing. The challenging part of managing University Computing Services is that technology makes each of these activities much more difficult to predict. For example, trying to plan for technology is complicated because of the rapid pace of technological change. The Internet and Web are redefining many services, and in many instances you have to be prepared to change plans as the technology changes. That, then, impacts budgeting for technology. Finally, recruiting and building a staff require tremendous effort.

Having a good staff is still the prerequisite to successful managing. Without a good staff, you can’t implement your plans. At the same time, the shortage in technology workers means that it is a worker's market. I know that any of my staff can call up a head hunter and be in a different job in two weeks. As such, I spend a lot of time trying to create a good working environment and trying to identify promising students to work in UCS.

In addition to managing the department, I take a leadership role in architecting the technology infrastructure we use. I am fortunate in that I have had a broad computing background myself. I have worked in the areas of applications programming, systems programming, administration, and network engineering, among others. My responsibility is to make sure we think about technology plans across the enterprise and consider all factors as we develop our plans. As such, support for technology is as important as network infrastructure when deploying new applications to the campus.

IRMJ: What skills are required to be the director of UCS?

Suess: I think the skills needed to be director of UCS fall into three broad categories: people, management, and technical. Information technology touches all aspects of the campus, from instruction and research through administration. As such, the impact of my decisions is felt throughout the enterprise. I spend a tremendous amount of time interacting with constituent groups in different areas and working on campus committees. To be successful in the job, you must be able to relate to people in many different capacities and roles, and you must be able to present highly technical concepts in understandable terms. At the same time, you need to be able to relate to your staff and advocate for solutions that protect their interests.

Management skills fall into the ones associated with developing the planning, budgeting, and staffing models for your department. Budget preparation and planning are time-consuming tasks, but critical to success. Without adequate funding for key initiatives, success is impossible. I have had to learn about how our campus is funded so that I can tap into other sources of financial support and can speak intelligently when talking to our budget director.

Technical skills are important. As the head of a computing department, you need to be knowledgeable on many different technology areas. While it is impossible to be an expert on everything, you need to be knowledgeable enough to speak intelligently when the subject comes up in a meeting. As such, it is important that you have credibility in technology with people inside and outside your department. I love experimenting with new technology and looking for ways that it can benefit the organization. By doing this, I stay up-to-date on technology, and I can take a
Related Content

Norwel Equipment Co. Limited Partnership (L.P.) Internet Upgrade
www.igi-global.com/article/norwel-equipment-limited-partnership-internet/44615?camid=4v1a

Extraction of Blood Vessels in Retina
www.igi-global.com/article/extraction-of-blood-vessels-in-retina/212613?camid=4v1a

The Impact of the Mode of Data Representation for the Result Quality of the Detection and Filtering of Spam
Reda Mohamed Hamou, Abdelmalek Amine and Moulay Tahar (2017). *Ontologies and Big Data Considerations for Effective Intelligence* (pp. 150-168).

Fit Between Strategy and IS Specialization: A Framework for Effective Choice and Customization of Information System Application Modules
www.igi-global.com/article/fit-between-strategy-specialization/1295?camid=4v1a