

Report to the Senate
2011-2012 Computing Services Committee, October 10, 2012.

Committee members: [Easton](#), Fred (Management: Marketing); [Ingram](#), Malcolm (VPA: Drama); [Krishnakumar](#), Ambika (CoHE: Child and Family Studies); [Milonovich](#), Brandon (Graduate Student); [Mulliken](#), Adina (Librarian); [Sibert](#) Ernest ECS:Computer & Info. Science, and four other non-participating senate members.

Liaison to Computing Services Committee: [Jenny S. Gluck](#) (Associate CIO)

For 2011-2012, the Computing Services Committee focused on productivity issues:

- ***The “Curse of e-mail”:*** a typical corporate user finds 100+ new messages in his or her inbox each day, and spends 1 – 2 hours processing them. *What opportunities exist to improve productivity for faculty and staff in this domain?*
- ***Capturing the constituent’s voice in ITS policy deliberations.*** In recent years ITS has adopted and implemented a number of operational policies intended to secure our network and improve its performance. However, several users report that teaching and research productivity was been adversely affected by some of those policies. These include ITS policies that limit administrative rights, prohibit users from managing workstation power settings, require hard disk encryption, or block execution of custom research programs or applications. Eventually, ITS found work-arounds. *How can we ensure that ITS captures the voice of the faculty in future deliberations, and that reasonable efforts are made to anticipate adverse impacts and devise work-arounds before the policy is rolled out?*
- ***Accessible Instructional Materials:*** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires accessible versions of instructional materials for students who are blind or otherwise unable to use printed materials. Accessible formats for printed materials include enlarged text, Braille, and audio, or machine-readable text. The major computer operating systems ship with at least limited screen-reading functionality (Microsoft Windows Narrator, Apple Mac OS X VoiceOver, and Linux-based Emacspeak, Yasr and SpeakupOS). The university also relies on assistive technologies such as text-to-speech screen readers (Jaws, FS Reader) to enable web-based delivery of course materials and other services to our students. However, visually impaired students must still rely on the assistance of others to interpret information conveyed through color differences, as figures or as tables. Often, that assistance is provided by the Office of Disability Services (ODS) and the Library. *Are there steps that can and should be taken by the university community to increase the independence of visually-impaired students, reduce the need for ODS and Library support, and more effectively leverage the capabilities of these assistive technologies?*

The committee concluded its work this year with two recommendations to ITS (see appendix): first, a set of guidelines for capturing the voice of the faculty in future policy deliberations; second, the suggestion that ITS (through its distributed support staff) educate the user community about some best practices for managing e-mail. ITS has accepted the Computing Services recommendations.

Regrettably, the committee did not have time to complete its investigation of assistive technologies.

Appendix: CSC Committee Recommendations for ITS

Recommendation 1: Capture the voice of the faculty in the deliberations regarding technology initiatives at Syracuse University (April 5, 2012; revised 04-12-2012, 04-27-2012, 05-30-2012)

The foundation of the university's vision of Scholarship in Action rests on high quality teaching, research, and engagement. SU's Information and Technology Services (ITS), and the infrastructure it oversees, facilitates the achievement of that vision by supporting these fundamental faculty responsibilities. The Senate Computing Services Committee* (CSC) appreciates and applauds the diligent efforts of ITS to protect our information infrastructure, secure its information, and maintain and improve its performance. However, CSC has found that previous efforts to provide a safer, more secure computing environment for our diverse community of users have, in some cases, adversely affected the productivity of faculty and graduate students engaged in scholarly pursuits. Both CSC and ITS agree that it is preferable to avoid adversely affecting faculty and student productivity when reasonable alternatives exist to accomplish the desired end. The challenge for all parties is to anticipate when such instances are likely to arise.

Given the diversity of approaches to teaching, research and service on our campus, it is unlikely that any deliberative body will fully understand all of the positive and adverse impacts of campus-wide technological initiatives. However, CSC believes that the current organizational unit charged with evaluating campus-wide technology initiatives, the Technology Leadership Council, can and should expand the scope of its assessments to formally incorporate the voice of the faculty in its deliberations.

CSC and ITS leadership agree that additional efforts may be needed to accomplish this aim. Accordingly, for future initiatives ITS will:

- 1) report potential technology initiatives to the Associate Deans for Research at their regular meetings, and solicit their feedback on potential implications for teaching, research and service;
- 2) regularly communicate with each school's faculty and graduate students to describe potential technology initiatives and seek their impressions of the potential impact of those initiatives on teaching, research, and service;
- 3) ensure that potential impacts perceived by the faculty are part of the formal record of the TLCs deliberations to adopt a particular initiative; and
- 4) where warranted, identify potential work-arounds to diminish the impact of any adverse consequences.

* CSC is charged with the "...responsibility to advise and consult with administrators of computing services on major issues of policy and procedure for the use of University computing facilities..." including "...the creation and maintenance of effective structures for communicating and consulting with clients."

Appendix: CSC Committee Recommendations for ITS

Recommendation 2: E-mail management demonstrations and training (April 27, 2012).

Worldwide, the average corporate email user now receives just over 100 e-mail messages/day, but faces the prospect of a 20% increase in volume by 2015 (Radicati Group, Inc., 2012, p. 4). Each e-mail message consumes some of the recipient's time to identify it, read it, respond or follow through on it, and so on, so its' continued growth could have significant productivity implications (Forsyth & Jenkins, 2009). Rising volumes of e-mail traffic also lead to perceptions of increased stress in recipients and in some cases, e-mail apnea (Stone, 2008).

The productivity implications of E-mail "overload" has long been recognized (Whittaker & Sidner, 1996). Chase & Clegg (2011) estimate that typical users currently spend one to two hours each day processing e-mail. Although solutions to e-mail overload involve both recipients and senders, there are at least three strategies that recipients can unilaterally apply to combat "the tyranny of e-mail:" (1) filtering messages on arrival in order to prioritize responses; (2) filing messages logically into folders structured to ease later retrieval; and (3) turning off notification and only checking messages at certain times, reducing the frequency of interruptions (Forsyth & Jenkins, 2008).

Microsoft Outlook includes several tools (folders, filters, categories, follow-up flags) that support these strategies. Because these tools could help reduce anxiety levels while boosting campus-wide productivity, CSC believes it would be worthwhile to review practical e-mail management strategies with faculty and staff.

CSC recommends that ITS, through its Distributed Support Staff, seek opportunities to demonstrate the potential benefits of these e-mail management tools to the faculty and staff of the university and ascertain the level of interest in learning more about them. Provided sufficient interest exists, CSC urges ITS devise and deliver training in the effective use of these tools.

References

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