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Technical Difficulties

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technical difficulties
Faculty and computers—Are they really up to boot?

Story by Jacqui Becker

The professor runs to the tech man of the department, hysterically seeking advice. She doesn’t understand how she can type on the new computer on her desktop. The computer technician calmly shows the frantic professor that her keyboard is underneath the desk on a rolling tray, which can be pulled out at her typing convenience.

David Blumhagen was the computer technician who solved the mystery of the missing keyboard. Systems-support technicians and computer-savvy users must deal with computer illiterate faculty and students every day. But how sharp are faculty members when it comes to technology?

“I deal with about one problem every 10 minutes,” says Jeremy Haubrich, head systems-support specialist for the Greenlee School of Journalism. “Just like every other department, we deal with the same old grind. Someone puts the floppy disk in the zip drive, and it won’t work. You can’t unplug your computer to plug in your cell charger and expect your computer to still work. Or you’ve got to turn the monitor on. Basically, just sticking the wrong thing in about every place.”

Haubrich and Blumhagen exchange stories from their work. “Sometimes they’re just plain terrible,” says Haubrich as he smiles and shakes his head.

“It’s like they’ve gotten lost somewhere along the way,” Blumhagen adds. “They just aren’t as advanced as we sometimes wish they were. There are a lot of intelligent people, but they’re awed by computers.”

Haubrich recalls the time when a professor was faced with scrolling pages every time she opened a Microsoft Word document. He went to the rescue only to find a book sitting on the Enter key.

“I love profs who get nervous and are freaking out over something that is simple,” Blumhagen says with a smirk. He recalls the keyboard story and can still see the light dawn on the professor’s face after being shown her new keyboard.

Tim Morrison and Ben Spike, who work at the Ames Lab Technical Administrative Services Facility (TASF), continuously see the same names coming across their work order requests. For $52 an hour, they service computers within the Ames Lab, which includes many faculty and researchers employed by ISU. At the two exchange stories, they remember a lady who deleted half of her system files after she began deleting folders she didn’t recognize. “Then she wondered why it didn’t work,” Morrison says with a chuckle. He says that one complaint is the most urgent: “If people can’t check their e-mail, they get upset.”

Philip Spike, animal science professor of 26 years, has seen the computer gradually enter the academic world. He remembers e-mail’s introduction into his department. “People hesitated until it became clear that they received information after everyone else if they were still waiting for it to hit their mailboxes,” he says.

List serves allow professors an opportunity to notify students of information that may not have been discussed in class. Jane Peterson, journalism professor, finds the list serves very effective for one-on-one discussions.

Assistant scientist Joe Anderson does computing and consulting for three departments: biochemistry, biophysics and molecular biology; zoology and genetics; and botany. His support staff has set up an e-mail account for computer problems to “level the playing field” on
responding to faculty and staff technical difficulties. Over the past year, he's received nearly 1,000 e-mails with questions or problems. "We have people that are great to work with and those that challenge us quite a bit." Anderson says.

The knowledge levels differ from professor to professor. Some people who have been here for 20 years to prefer to not even have a computer on their desk, says Greg Buttery, College of Business systems-support specialist. "People coming in who got their PhDs three years ago are obviously more computer savvy."

Spike sees people who do a very good job of pushing technology within their classroom; others use it minimally. He's seen improvement over the past 10 to 15 years as more people become comfortable with computers. "As an academic community, we must ask, 'How can we improve upon the process of learning or have access to a broader range of material?'" Spike says.

"There's a core set of faculty who want to try new things and have the time to do it," says Pete Boysen, director of the Computer Supported Learning Center. "The most difficult part is the knowledge of what is possible and what is the best way to teach students."

Nearly all professors use e-mail, which has allowed students in large introductory courses to develop closer relationships with professors and classmates, says Tom Ingebrirsen, professor in charge for the new Liberal Arts and Sciences Center for Online Learning.

And there are many faculty members who may know even more about technology than the support staff, says Allan Schmidt, manager of the instructional development of the Instructional Technology Center (ITC). "Then on the other side there are those who are still happy with e-mail or presenting with overhead transparencies," he says.

Originally computers were expected to save time, but time is also one of the biggest factors that keep professors from staying up to boot in Computer Land.

The LAS Center for Online Learning will allow professors an opportunity to take advantage of the resources the university offers. An instructor working with the center will have experts in design, evaluation and computer programming at his or her disposal, Ingebrirsen says. This way, professors can use technology without fully understanding it.

"I can't imagine being a person just learning the basics while using it. In this field, if you don't learn something new in six months, you're obsolete," Buttery says.

"The faculty has a lot of other responsibilities than just learning about technology," Boysen adds. "We have to be careful we don't overload them with information that they won't use."

Many professors who have been at the university for several years will find students to run computer programs for the classroom, just as many executive officers do in corporations. "Even in companies, someone who's been there for a long time will have their secretary provide the computer end of things," Buttery says. "It is a matter of how someone entered the field, if they are self-sufficient and whether they go out and explore."

Every faculty member's technology needs differ based on his or her area of discipline. ITC and many other computer support groups offer informational sessions allowing faculty to work hands on with new technology and to also give examples of how to successfully incorporate the methods in their classroom.

Only 650 people have attended one or more of the ITC weekly sessions. The Greenlee School of Journalism had Friday afternoon sessions at one time but cancelled them after low turnouts. However, Haubrich has seen faculty members who didn't get into technology very much in the beginning, now making their own Web sites because of students' requests.

Getting computer savvy is easier for some than for others.

Peterson says faculty members usually have to teach themselves or go to workshops to understand the latest technology. She has lined her shelves with different "Dummy" books including Pagemaker for Dummies and QuarkExpress for Dummies. "I've always found it exciting to learn new things, and it's never been a chore," Peterson says. "That's not to say that there hasn't been times when I've wanted to throw my computer out the window."

Peterson says it would be harder teach in the computer labs without the security of having the technicians down the hall or a phone call away.

"I can get myself to learn about software, but there are so many things that happen in a classroom that could shut down the whole class," she says. "I don't know hardware that well, and after all, I was the person that couldn't get the screen to work."

While the systems-support teams can help those with lagging computer skills, the technology revolution on campus lies in the hands of those willing to continue pushing ahead. The rest will go at their own pace.

"If we mandate something, it's a kiss of death," Vice Provost Howard Shapiro says.

While some professors have their own Web sites and others can't find the power switch, one thing's for sure: The support staff will continue to be busy.

Jacqui Becker is a junior in journalism and mass communication and a senior editor for Ethos.