

Working Harmoniously with your IT Department (Yes, It Can Be Done!)

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Overview

When working in eLearning, it is critical to have a good relationship with your organization's IT department. You will come to rely on them for technical assistance and advice more often than you realize. However, IT departments are sometimes hesitant, and even difficult to work with. This can cause major headaches and delays for eLearning professionals. A good working relationship with your organization's IT department can save time, headaches, and ultimately improve the success rate of eLearning projects.

In this session, you will learn that one reason why we run into this situation is that IT departments are generally overworked, and the employees are territorial about their systems. You will learn ways of involving IT employees in your projects, and how IT can be involved throughout the process of project implementations. You will learn IT's typical concerns, like bandwidth and resource utilization, and how to make sure you work within their boundaries to successfully implement and maintain your eLearning tools and systems.

You will also learn:

- Why IT departments are sometimes difficult to work with,
- Ways to establish a solid working relationship with your IT department,
- Tips for managing eLearning projects that require the IT department's input and
- How to establish IT-friendly processes to support ongoing maintenance of your eLearning tools and systems.

About

B.J. Schone is a Senior Learning Technology Specialist at Qualcomm in San Diego, and he also works remotely as an eLearning Specialist at Ferrellgas in Kansas City. B.J. earned his B.A. in Computer Science and his M.Ed. in Information Science and Learning Technologies from the University of Missouri–Columbia. He is also the author of the *eLearning Weekly* blog (<http://www.eLearningWeekly.com>) and author of the free eBook *Engaging Interactions for eLearning* (<http://www.EngagingInteractions.com>).

Disclaimer

Some generalizations will be made during this presentation. Obviously, not all IT workers are the same. No ill-will is meant toward IT workers. In fact, I started my career in the IT world, so I understand and respect their opinions and feelings. It's not my intention to offend anybody, but if I do, I apologize!

Common situations where you depend upon the IT department

Selecting, implementing, upgrading, maintaining, and troubleshooting:

- Learning Management Systems (LMS)
- Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS)
- Content / Document Management Systems (C/DMS)
- Electronic Performance Support Systems (EPSS)
- eLearning courses
- Wikis, blogs, etc.

Setting up, upgrading, and troubleshooting desktop (user) computers:

- Hardware
- Software

Common problems that arise with IT workers

- They're too busy / overworked.
- They don't want to spend time working on training issues.
- They won't return phone calls or emails (the black hole of communication).
- They don't cooperate.
- They don't complete requests on time.

Understanding your IT department

It's important to understand:

What drives IT workers

Understanding their motivation helps you better understand their behavior.

- IT workers are happy when things are running smoothly and on-schedule.
- IT workers are usually concerned by how systems affect each other.
- IT workers are usually concerned about resource utilization (ex. bandwidth, database load).
- IT workers are usually concerned that your "stuff" will break their "stuff."
- All of the above are genuinely valid concerns; however, IT workers don't always effectively communicate their concerns.

Roles within your IT department

Common roles in IT are:

- **Directors**
I rarely work with Directors, unless I'm praising some of the work performed by their staff.
- **Managers**
Stay in touch with your IT manager(s) on a regular basis. Tell them about your upcoming projects and make sure they understand what IT resources

you'll need from them.

- **System Engineers / System Administrators**
These IT “generalists” are often involved with server administration and general IT support.
- **Network Engineers / Network Administrators**
These workers administer your organization’s network and are very concerned with bandwidth. Make sure you talk to them before rolling out any large projects or courses that may require significant network utilization.
- **Database Administrators**
Always involve DBAs when discussing new systems or changes to existing systems. Make sure you have their buy-in early; they are an incredibly valuable ally.
- **Desktop Support Staff**
Bring in these workers when discussing changes to end-user computers. They can help you with organization-wide rollouts of browser plugins, software, etc., when needed. They usually support end-users, too, so they can provide first-line feedback about learning systems.
- **Programmers / Developers**
These workers may be able to help you troubleshoot issues with code, and they may also be able to help you develop custom in-house applications.

Working harmoniously with your IT department

There are several things to consider in order to maintain a good working relationship with your IT department. Below are several ideas to consider:

Have a go-to person

Work with your IT manager(s) to find out who you should contact when you need assistance. Become friends with this person and stay in touch with them on a regular basis. Give them as much notice when you anticipate that you'll need their help. And find out who you should contact when they aren't available.

Have testing environments

Create a testing environment for your LMS, and as many systems as possible. Then, when changes are ready to be made, walk through the steps in the testing environment. This lets IT have a dry-run of the change, making them more comfortable. Plus, if anything goes wrong, you may have prevented a much larger problem.

Consider staggering rollouts of courses

Phased rollouts of projects/technology sometimes helps reduce the load on systems (ex. a large eLearning course with video). Consider rolling out to each of your organization's regions or divisions one at a time, instead of all at once.

Good communication

- Continually show interest and ask for feedback.
 - What can I do to make things easier for you?
 - Is there a better way we can tackle this issue?
- Listen. Are they trying to tell you something? Maybe you aren't using the best approach for a particular situation. Genuinely consider their feedback.
- Stay positive. If you're frustrated, take a step back and take a deep breath.
- Understand that personality conflicts can occur anywhere, not just with IT workers.
- Keep in mind that they may be unhappy about a totally unrelated issue.
- Address issues before they become a pattern.

- Seek common ground. Ideally, you are both trying to do what is best for the organization. When in doubt, re-focus and figure out the best way to continue. It's not "my" department vs. "your" department.
- Explain the need first. When you desire a new system or identify a need, explain it to the IT department and tell them about the potential solutions you've found. This helps them understand the context of your situation, and this information may help them provide suggestions, tips, etc.
- Anticipate IT's concerns and have a response prepared. Know what they will ask before they ask it!
- Always agree on next steps. Don't just leave a situation hanging – decide what needs to be done next, and who is responsible for doing it.
- Work it out. Try not to escalate issues to upper management unless absolutely necessary. If things are really headed down the wrong path, document each interaction, just to be safe.
- Do your homework! Study up on terminology. Read intro books to become familiar with basic technologies and how they work. IT workers will appreciate your efforts to understand their world.

Be reasonable

- Establish reasonable project timelines. Remember that IT workers are usually juggling several important projects at once.
- Don't expect instant help unless you truly have a major problem.
- Find out if IT has major projects coming up. Understand their schedules and try to work with/around them.

Establish processes

- Talk to IT when new projects arise. Do they want to be involved throughout the vendor selection phase? Or do they only want to be contacted when you have narrowed down to one or two vendors? Let them choose their involvement.
- Use a ticketing system to track all open issues with IT. Simply sending them an email about an issue is not enough; emails can easily be ignored.

A simple ticketing system can usually be built in-house very easily, or you may be able to use your Help Desk's ticketing system.

- Establish a migration process to push software changes, upgrades, hot fixes, etc. to your production systems. Involve your QA department as needed.
- If necessary, establish a Service Level Agreement (SLA) between the training department and the IT department. This is an agreement made between managers and/or directors to commit to a certain response time when dealing with major problems, such as system outages.

Recognize and reward

- If your IT people are meeting and/or exceeding your expectations, make sure they get the recognition they deserve. Email their manager and director praising the hard work they've done for you. If your organization has some type of award (ex. employee of the quarter), consider nominating them if their work is worthy of the award.
- Talk to your go-to person on a regular basis. Find out their favorite coffee, soda, food, candy, etc. It never hurts to drop off a small token of thanks after a major change or after a big problem has been resolved. (In fact, feel free to do this to show your appreciation for *any* IT workers!)

Open discussion

- Why types of resistance do you run into?
- What tips or tricks can you share for making things run smoother when working with IT?

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