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## Late-Night Stress on the IT Help Desk

**Pressed to provide technology help in the wee hours, many colleges turn to outside vendors**

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It is just after 2 a.m. on a Tuesday here when a frantic student calls Brian P. Woodward from a college on the West Coast. She cannot log into her online course, and she has an assignment due by midnight, Pacific time. That's in less than an hour.

"If I don't turn it in by midnight," the student pleads, "it doesn't count."

Mr. Woodward is a customer-service representative at Presidium Learning, Inc., a company in this rural Kentucky town that handles technology help desks for about 450 institutions. He takes her call and logs into the college's network from his computer to see what the problem is. It turns out the server is down.

The network may not be fixed in time, he tells the student, so he will e-mail her a receipt of this help-desk call as proof that she did everything she could to meet the deadline. He also suggests e-mailing the instructor now. But the student says she does not know the instructor's e-mail address. So Mr. Woodward looks that up for her, too.

His next step: Contact officials at the college to let them know they have a problem. "We called it in, and they got it fixed," Mr. Woodward says in between sips of Pepsi. He often goes through four cans of soda during a night shift to help keep him awake.

With more and more students — especially those taking online courses — demanding access to technology help at all hours of the day and night, colleges are responding by extending help-desk hours. More than half are open late into the evening, according to a recent survey by Educause, the educational technology consortium, and a few are available 24/7. But colleges are not set up for the extra hours. Their staffs are too small, and their budgets too tight. So many institutions are outsourcing the service to Presidium and similar companies.

One of Presidium's clients is Tulane University, which began using the company's 24/7 help-desk service shortly after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. Adam Krob, director of end-user support at the university, says students and faculty members have made use of the extended hours since the switch.

"The demand has always been there for us to have longer hours," Mr. Krob says. "Students do their work at all times of the day and night."

Mr. Krob says the university has few distance-education students, but most students, on campus or online, still expect all-night service. "They're used to that model from their credit-card companies or from Amazon," he says. "They just live in a 24/7 world."

### **Customized Services**

Presidium's contracts with clients range from less than \$15,000 per year to just over \$1-million, depending on the size of the institution or university system and the services sold, such as what hours call takers will be available and what software the call takers will support.

In the Somerset call center, rows of cubicles are lined up in a large room, each with a computer and telephone headset.

At the beginning of the semester, when things are busiest, Presidium will receive between 3,500 and 4,000 calls per day, with the majority coming in between 7 a.m. and midnight. Things run more slowly at night during most months. Just a handful of people are on duty, down from just over 100 during the day. However, the students and instructors who call are generally relieved that anyone is there at all.

"There is this sort of awe when people call at four in the morning," says Russ Manes, the quality-assurance manager. "They think, wow, I got a live voice."

The company tries to keep the process as seamless as possible. Call takers will admit they are contractors if a student asks, but they are also trained to say "we" and "our server" when talking about the college's technology system. The help-desk phone is automatically forwarded to Kentucky, so callers usually do not even realize that they are talking to someone far from the campus. The company also handles help-desk requests by e-mail and instant messages.

Sometimes, though, people call in for more help than the technical experts are prepared to handle.

Alex Cone, a customer-service representative at Presidium, says he got a call one night from someone threatening to commit suicide. The caller, who Mr. Cone later learned had a history of emotional problems, was up late and had tried calling all the campus numbers he could find to seek help. The IT help desk was the only one that anyone answered.

"He was telling me how his wife had left him," Mr. Cone says. "The only thing I knew to do was to keep him talking."

Mr. Cone was able to work with his supervisors to get in touch with local police, who helped the caller.

Most calls are usually not matters of life and death. Still, there is plenty of emotional drama, often in the form of 18-year-old students who are panicked about not getting an assignment done in time because of computer problems.

"Dealing with hysterical people can be a challenge," Mr. Cone says. "Half of it's not just resolving the problem. It's helping them resolve that emotional state."

Other companies besides Presidium provide 24/7 help-desk support, including PerceptIS, Learning House, and Connected Learning Network. None are as big as Presidium, which dominates the market.

### **Different Approaches**

But 24/7 services do not make sense for everybody. Buena Vista University, in Iowa, just went back to limited help-desk hours after two years of round-the-clock service, says Ken Clipperton, managing director of university information services.

The vendor providing the 24/7 help desk, which he would not name, did nothing wrong, Mr. Clipperton says. The demand simply did not justify the added cost. The fact is, only a handful of people per month called in the middle of the night. Since the university made the switch back, he says, nobody has complained: "It's been very well received on campus."

Other institutions are avoiding outside vendors altogether. Longwood University, in Virginia, doesn't have a 24/7 help desk but does have one that goes late into the evening, has found another way to staff it: specially trained students.

The university pays staff members to answer calls during normal working hours, from 7:45 a.m. to 5 p.m., says Francis Moore, chief information officer for the institution. After that, student operators field calls from their dormitory rooms and from their cellphones.

In exchange for room and board, the students stay available until at least midnight, but many of them stay awake and keep taking calls until two in the morning. "When they're done," says Mr. Moore, "they just turn their cellphones off."

Mark C. Sheehan, a research fellow at the Educause Center for Applied Research, surveyed about 450 colleges and universities earlier this year about their IT help desks. Only 4.9 percent of them were open all night, but the majority, 63.4 percent, kept their help desks open into the evening and sometimes on weekends.

What surprised Mr. Sheehan was that 30.5 percent of the institutions made their help desks available only during normal business hours, normally 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., when most students are in class. "When you look at the behavioral habits of the college-age person, 8 to 5 doesn't cut it," he says. "That's not when they're the most productive."

Evening hours may best fit the college bill, more so than 24/7 technical support, which also comes with management headaches.

Mr. Sheehan said a computer-services director he talked to at one college, which he did not name, ran into some problems with the overnight help.

"One of the staff members that he had hired was regularly having his girlfriend over during the shift," Mr. Sheehan says. "My inference was that the fellow's productivity was low."

#### **BIG PROBLEMS IN THE SMALL HOURS**

Although calls to information-technology help desks taper off in the middle of the night, some of these after-hours pleas are among the most urgent. Here are a few examples that came in to Presidium Learning Inc., a company that provides help-desk services to colleges, between midnight and 2 a.m. Eastern time on a recent night.

**12:30 a.m.**

**A student was trying to take an online test, but the images on the exam were not appearing properly.**

The call taker helped the student install an updated version of the software Java, then told the student to contact the instructor in order to begin the test again.

**12:37 a.m.**

**A student attempted to log in to an online course, but none of the content would appear.**

The call taker guided the student through the process of disabling Internet-browser pop-up blockers. Afterward, the needed content appeared.

**12:55 a.m.**

**A student could not access and view media files embedded in an online course.**

The call taker helped the student install a third-party media player recommended by the college. The media files then were able to play.

**1:58 a.m.**

**A faculty member was having trouble downloading online material from a publisher to WebCT course-management software.**

The call taker determined that the software did not recognize the publisher. After verifying the course, the call taker issued a valid download key for the instructor to use.