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The Support Service Crisis: A Misnomer

by [Gary Brown](#)

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The technology "support service crisis" is misnamed. In fact, the misnaming of what is a very real crisis exacerbates the problem rooted in how administration and faculty perceive and pursue technology support. We do not need to hire more support professionals; we need to provide better support for the technology professionals we've already hired.

Three articles point to this conclusion, including a close reading of Gilbert's ([2000](#)) new vision, a study from Wharton ([2000](#)), reports from Edutech (Fleit, [2000](#)) and Educause ([2000](#)), plus a recommendation from a campus strategic planning effort (W. Joerding, personal communication, November 29, 2000).

To appreciate the root cause of the exodus of technology professionals from education, it is useful to examine the ideas and observations recently articulated by Gilbert ([2000](#)). Gilbert, an advocate of "humane" approaches to teaching and learning with technology, calls for "a vision that embraces change, sets a direction for the integration of new applications of technology, makes the most of the resources we've already got, and recognizes how important it is to choose a future based on realistic analysis of where we are, where we've been, and where we want to go."

At the heart of Gilbert's "realistic analysis" are some knotty barriers that are, even as Gilbert presents them, as complicated and contradictory in his description as they are on our campuses, particularly when it comes to the changes implicit in faculty roles and responsibilities.

For instance, Gilbert observes that "even though most faculty have had very little training, incentive or opportunities to think about making choices among different combinations of technology, pedagogy, content, and education purpose," nonetheless, he says, *many* do think about new pedagogies *after* they begin to use new technology. He contends that often faculty who have had "no intention of changing the way they taught and the way their students learned" still have been enlightened when "they became aware of?Âçâ€šÃ†ÂˆÂˆÂˆ pedagogical options."

But evidence is absent from Gilbert's more specific observations. He notes, for instance, that course management systems make it "ever easier, more popular, and more expected for faculty members to place some course-related materials on the Web for students." But he also acknowledges, "These practices have so far been simple duplications or slight extensions of what was already being done in traditional classroom." The assumption that new technologies significantly transform pedagogy is not borne out. What appears to be much more prevalent is the use of technologies in ways that extend traditional pedagogies.

If transformational pedagogies aren't coming from the magic of new technologies, then there is reason to believe Gilbert's real hope for pedagogical change can be traced to *compassionate pioneers*. Compassionate pioneers, according to Gilbert, are faculty members "who feel a commitment to help their colleagues learn to use new technology/pedagogy combinations." He says, "compassionate pioneers can be among the most valuable resources for change at a college or university. Academic support services often benefit from the informal efforts of these unsung heroes." In fact, "compassionate pioneers could be instrumental in aggregating and focusing those efforts to help avoid some of the wasteful duplication." And Gilbert also observes that "thousands of faculty members are beginning to build their own modest course related collections of materials." But a realistic analysis must recognize the qualifications Gilbert sets in his previous observations as an indication of what is really emerging—a generally *unfocused* collection of *duplicate* materials that reflect, again, a modest extension of traditional pedagogies. If compassionate pioneers are benefiting academic support services, their impact is minimal. To the extent that these compassionate pioneers are producing innovative pedagogies and materials, the materials, as IT professionals will attest, are almost always varied in platform and systems requirements, which creates, in the process, an added burden for those who are responsible for supporting these innovations. Today's cutting edge, as Ehrmann ([2000](#)) observes, is tomorrow's legacy. And since the costs of supporting an innovation, as those in the support end of the business will also attest, are roughly equal to the costs of creating it, this aspect of the "cycle of failure," as Ehrmann identifies it, challenges the general assertion that the support service crisis can be addressed effectively by hiring more technology support.

Add to all of this that the gap between support and expectations, as Gilbert recognizes, extends beyond technology support. He argues that pedagogy experts and faculty development professionals, and even student technology assistants, are unlikely to reduce the need for more professional staff. "The gap is widening between the level of support services available and the expectations of faculty members, administrators, and students," Gilbert concludes, "The support service crisis is getting worse."

If throwing resources at the problem does not solve it, it makes sense to redefine the problem. Cappelli's ([2000](#)) study, "Are Information Technology Workers in Short Supply?" does just that. Cappelli argues that the quantity of available

technology workers is not the problem. Instead, "there is a shortfall in the ability of companies to recruit information technology (IT) employees, to assess their talent, and to make their jobs rewarding enough to keep them from quitting."

Cappelli's study casts light on many issues that affect the supply of technology workers, including immigration policies, the disinclination to hire older workers, and the risk that retraining workers will enable them to leave for better jobs elsewhere. He points out that "the number of workers who quit the programming field every year, for example, exceeds the number of new programming jobs." Cappelli adds, "It's peculiar to have a field that's thought to be so hot, yet where so many people are leaving in droves."

Still, the most compelling point Cappelli makes is that IT workers are often poorly managed, that their jobs are "ill-designed and boring," that they frequently find themselves working "in isolation on fragmented tasks that do not allow them to see the larger purpose of a project or to interact with other people," and that "many employers treat IT employees poorly and undervalue their contributions to companies."

Cappelli argues that it is premature to call for colleges to "churn out more IT-trained people in less time," as many companies do, or to "expand immigration to attract foreign IT workers." He suggests, rather, that we consider redesigning IT jobs. "The shabby treatment of workers contributes to high turnover rates and can lead to higher costs, since IT workers may demand more wages in exchange for doing tasks that offer few rewards of other kinds."

Cappelli's analysis of IT workers in industry comes home to education in a recent report from Cornell to Educause ([2000](#)) that acknowledges the drain of IT professionals who are leaving higher education. The report identifies several dimensions of the problem, including the fact that "priorities are not set based on good stewardship of overall resources, but based on 'prima donna' and 'squeaky wheel' standards." The report concludes: "Climate issues, more often than salary, seem to be the precipitating factors for staff leaving Cornell."

Even more pointedly, a recent Edutech (2000) report states:

Perhaps most disappointingly for IT, cooperation in staffing has also been very difficult to advance. . . . End-user support positions are inevitably tied to direct relationships with the people they serve. Faculty and administrative staff have both insisted on near-captive relationships with IT staff (Fleit, L., 2000).

The disturbing implications of this "near-captive" service, embedded in the unfortunate designation "support staff," are baldly revealed in a recent communication circulated to a planning committee in which a professor asserts, "We need to focus on faculty services. I would like [*a central unit*] to serve faculty desires whatever they may be" (W. Joerding, personal communication, November 29, 2000).

Of course, such a position belies the current obliviousness to the movement toward student-centered learning. It suggests a haphazard and capricious approach toward allocating scarce resources in a time of harsh public scrutiny. It also acutely reveals the missing ingredient in Gilbert's analysis: an expanded vision of, and appropriate incentives for, increased *faculty* responsibility. The lack of informed administration and faculty who recognize that education requires a new, broader team of professionals working together reveals, by contrast, the ugly underbelly of the support service crisis—the dominance of a small but *squeaky, prima donna* ivory caste, the purported purveyors of life-long learning, who insist on approaching the process of teaching and learning with technology as if they have little of value to learn from educational research, let alone the peons who ought to be content pulling their wires or putting a little flash in their animations.

Until this aspect of the vision is embraced, we should not be surprised by the exodus of IT professionals charged with serving a too often contemptuous faculty (use the back door when you leave, please). As budgets shrink and expectations rise, we have to sort through this crisis, by whatever name. We need to confront the persistent legacy of a small but potent group of cantankerous scholars who favor those aspects of electronic instruction that exacerbate the truly problematic distance in education, which is not geography but a haughty preference to hold others' expertise, and too often even students, at more than arm's length. We need strong leadership from administration and faculty alike to aggressively counter the legacy of those who hold vehemently to the lost sanctuary of the classroom and who fail to recognize the new world of learning that requires broad, collaborative teams working together. Finally, we all need to listen more earnestly to the expertise and experience of others—especially those unique, if increasingly remote and disengaged, student voices.

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