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Board Report - Technology
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Looking Back

Helpdesk

Most agencies that perform services (such as technology support) adopt a system which manages many aspects of the workflow. These systems are often referred to as a "helpdesk" system. For many years LCSD based our helpdesk system on an freely available system called Liberum and which was hosted by a Windows NT4 computer. About two years ago, that computer failed and our helpdesk system was never resurrected.

While Liberum was a great little program which made very little demand on the server host, it was also very limited as to the feature set available for both customers and technicians. When it failed, in many ways, we had been done a favor.

I don't think any "look back" at our helpdesk would be complete without some perspective of how hated this system was. Some staff simply refused to use it because it required a login/password which was not necessarily the same one they used for their local computer, it took several steps to get to the page where you could fill in the request, they couldn't access it when their computer wasn't working because, well, their computer wasn't working. It was not long that our helpdesk solution (like the vast majority of ALL helpdesk systems) was thought of as too cumbersome, too hard to figure out, too hard to access, and got a reputation akin to a small country dictator with delusions of grandeur. In short, it was a great target for focusing one's frustration. Since it was used so little, most people didn't even know it was no longer available.

What's Current

Current Helpdesk Offering

For the past couple of years, we have come to rely on a relatively low-tech solution of an email address anyone could use to report issues. It is easy to remember, doesn't require a password, doesn't have a complicated form to fill out, and is taking advantage of the already finely honed email skills possessed by many of our staff. When someone wants to report a problem, we simply tell them to send an email to tech@lacenterschools.org. It has not probably won the hearts and minds of our constituents, but its simplicity of use and overall familiarity with the process has made it much less of a target for staff angst. The biggest drawback has been for the technology department to manage the problems reported in this manner. It also lacks the ability to track issues, identify trends, or manage the workflow in any systemic way. But it works well enough for the most part.

Looking Forward

Spiceworks

One of the things Brian Mangus has brought to the tech team is an adventurous spirit and willingness to look at problems with a completely different perspective. To that end, Brian took it upon himself, on his own time, to explore options, run ideas past Joel and I, and really dig into the possible solutions we might want to adopt. The one caveat that I had given him was that the old system (Liberum) was free. As he explored options, he became acquainted with a different hosted system put forth by the group known as Spiceworks. He has spent the better part of a year playing with Spicedesk, getting it installed, learning the interface, its capabilities, its limitation, and getting comfortable using it to manage technology workflow. Within the last month, without having to bother any of our customer base with doing things a different way, we have begun using Spiceworks as our helpdesk system. It is a web-based server that has a dizzying feature set. It tracks things I didn't even think existed. Now that he's shared with me some of the features it brings to the table, I have marvelled at what it can do and all for the price of an old computer into which we installed some RAM and a new (and cheap) processor.

Spiceworks (or, as we call it, Spicedesk) is a great no-license-required system. I have not used it to the extent that Brian and Joel have, but they continue to inform me of new features and different ways we can address the issues on a variety of things such as inventory management, issue tracking, monitoring trends,software compliance, network mapping and discovery, advanced reporting, and more. In a future report, I'll provide more details and examples of this system as I get more acquainted with how it all works. Right now it is "Brian's baby" and he is learning more all the time. The team has begun using the system and it promises to be a really nice addition to the management of our work.