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All Together Now: Using an Internal Google Site to Streamline Workflows

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Abstract

During the 2011–2012 academic year, the College of Charleston's Addlestone Library merged the Student Computing Support Desk and the Reference Desk into a single Information Desk service point in the center of the first floor of the library. At the newly combined desk, students could receive research assistance as well as computer assistance in one centralized location. Workers at the newly combined desk included library staff, IT staff, and student peer staff. This innovation session demonstrated how an internal Information Desk Google site was used to streamline workflows and get everyone working together.

Twenty-Nine Employees, Two Departments, One Desk

Prior to 2011, Addlestone Library had three service desks on the first floor of the library: the Circulation Desk, the Reference Desk, and the Student Computing Support Desk. Checkouts and reserves were at one desk, research assistance was at another desk, and computing help was at a third desk. Depending on their needs, students would have to go to multiple service points for assistance. Additionally, it was challenging to staff three separate service points 98 hours per week. In the Fall 2011 semester, the library's reference department teamed with information technology's student computing support department to provide both research and computing services at one desk. The goal was for 15 library staff members, 4 information technology professionals, and 10 peer staff student employees to provide consistent research and computing services at one combined service point.

In the Beginning

In the beginning, everything was everywhere. There were paper procedures scattered about the desk and the reference office. There was a blog and a wiki for reference, a blog for media (which was part of the reference department), and another blog for student computing support. There were research guides, a knowledgebase, and a listserv to which only the librarians were subscribed. Interlibrary loan (which was also part of the reference department) had its own web site since they were on a separate ILLIAD server.

Although it was difficult to find anything, no one wanted to give up what they felt were pieces of their workplace identity.

In addition, everyone did not know everything. The IT professionals knew how to fix the students' Wi-Fi connections, but didn't know which databases would be best for specific research topics. The librarians knew the library's databases, but airports were where planes landed not where Macs connected to the secure network. The peer staff student employees had rudimentary knowledge in both areas, but were unfamiliar with library policies and procedures.

Pulling It All Together

As three disparate groups of employees in two different departments struggled to get on one page, the college announced the availability of Google Apps for Education. At the College of Charleston, students and faculty have access to Google applications which provide the ability to create and share documents, spreadsheets, forms, calendars, and web sites. Additionally, students access their e-mail through a Google e-mail application dubbed "Cmail." Since faculty and staff remained on the Microsoft Outlook e-mail client, an Information Desk listserv was created to facilitate communication amongst our entire staff.

Google Apps for Education intrinsically fosters collaboration amongst students, faculty, and staff. Once logged into Google, the entire suite of tools is available. The tools are basic and only somewhat configurable, but they are easy to use and accessible to all. Created material can be shared with the public or protected and shared

only with members of your institution or of your staff. The internal Google site, created from a template over winter break and shown in Figure 1, can be accessed only by Information Desk employees using their college log-ins.

Figure 1. Information Desk Internal Google Site

Site Highlights

Announcements

Although announcements can be made through e-mail using the Information Desk listserv, student employees in particular don't always access or read their e-mail. The announcements section of the web site utilizes a blog post format that ensures timely information, such as library events or wireless network alerts, are available on the Information Desk computers at all times. Posts in this section contain information that is pertinent only for a limited time. Once the information is no longer useful, it can be removed to prevent clutter.

Schedule

While the library and IT staff members have set hours they prefer, student employee schedules are constantly changing. Google forms and spreadsheets are used to help organize the chaos. Prior to the start of each semester, a "sign up for hours" link to a Google form is e-mailed to the listserv and posted in the announcements section of the web site. Students log- in to the form and select their available hours using their college account. The form feeds a spreadsheet allowing

the scheduler to see which students are available for each hour of the day. The schedule is produced as a Google Calendar and shared with the students through their college accounts. It is readily accessible each time students log into their
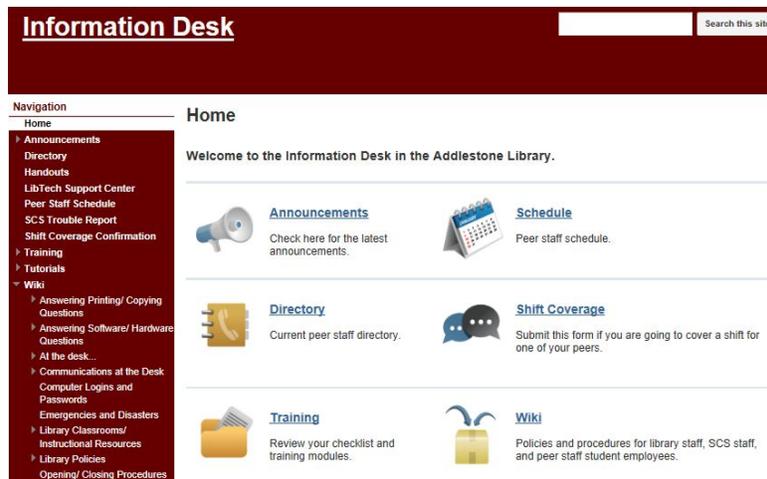
e-mail. Additionally, a Google gadget makes it easy to insert the schedule into a page on the Information Desk site where it can be seen by library and student computing support staff.

Shift Coverage

Of course, the moment the schedule is set; someone can't make their shift and needs someone to cover. An online shift coverage confirmation form is available for these emergencies. Students seek a peer to cover for them. The peer then logs in and completes the form confirming coverage of the shift. Since students are signed into their college accounts, their log-in serves as their electronic signature on the form.

Directory

When the student employees sign up for hours, we collect their e-mail addresses and mobile phone numbers to populate a directory. Library and student computing support staff e-mail address, mobile phone numbers, and office phone numbers are also entered. This helps keep everyone connected and is especially useful when trying to cover shifts at the last minute.

Mobile

Google's optimization of their applications for mobile devices streamlines workflows away from the library. Add a shortcut to the schedule on the home screen of a smartphone and tap to see who is working on a specific day, as shown in Figure 2. Tap a mobile phone number in the directory to phone or text a peer to cover a shift or to call a staff member's office phone. To further facilitate substitutions, student employees can submit shift coverage confirmation forms from their smartphones.

Figure 2. Mobile Version of Peer Staff Student Schedule

Training

Training is conducted through our peer staffing course in the college's learning management system, OAKS. To provide additional timely access, all training documents are available on the Information Desk site. Training is coordinated jointly by a member of the library staff and a member of the student computing support staff. A series of assignments and face to face meetings teach students and staff the skills they need to work at the Information Desk.

Wiki

The first half of each semester is spent training new staff. It's impossible for anyone to remember everything in just a few weeks. Furthermore, even longtime, permanent staff members have difficulty keeping track of the myriad of policies, procedures, databases, and constantly evolving technology of today's library. A wiki is employed to sort the knowledge everyone working at the desk needs at their fingertips. Pages within the wiki link to the previously mentioned knowledgebase, policies, procedures, blogs, research guides, and web sites from one central location. No one has to give up their blog or provide copies of their procedures since everything can be linked or uploaded to the wiki.

Search Box

Since the site includes an internal Google search box, information can be found quickly and easily no matter where it is located. Staff members do not need to remember where or when they saw a particular announcement, policy, or procedure. They type a keyword into the search box, and if the information is linked to the site, it will appear.

In the End

In the end, after a year together, the workflow has been streamlined at the Information Desk through one central, internal Google site. Everyone has contributed to the content of the site due to the collaborative nature of the Google Apps tools. Coordinating the scheduling of the student employees was the biggest challenge, but the forms, spreadsheets, and calendar applications which are optimized for mobile use have greatly facilitated this task. The site brings together disparate information such as announcements, training modules, and mobile phone numbers in

one organized place. Finally, the wiki serves as the central depository for procedures and links and is fully searchable to assist all Information Desk staff in serving the College of Charleston community.

References

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