

Superusers: how to improve user support and information flow?

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This section is based on a Norwegian Master's Thesis by Thomas C.C. Almnes with the title "Superbruker. Hvordan forbedre brukerstøtte of informasjonsflyt," Department of Informatics, University of Oslo, 2001

Only the recommendations are referred here. They are based on a literature survey and qualitative interviews and logs of requests to the superusers in the health sector in a municipality in Norway. "Superusers" are those people who have specific computer skills and have taken on the role of supporting their peers in an organization. "Local heroes" is another term for this role.

Selection

The selection of people for the superuser role seems to be the most important issue for creating a well functioning support system. The superuser should be selected amongst the peers, so that she understands the problems that the users might have. She could preferably be one whom people often calls for assistance, which would guarantee that she is a caring person.

Local managers should be avoided, since they are often too busy and not always available. In addition, people do not like to expose their misunderstandings to their boss.

People who are unwilling to take on the role should also be avoided. They may behave hostile or less caring towards their peers, and if so, the users will soon stop consulting them.

Skills

The superuser has to be more proficient in the computer system than those she is going to support. This seems self evident, but nevertheless, users with ordinary qualifications have been appointed superusers without having necessary skills or been given additional training.

In addition to computer skills, the superuser also ought to have skills in guiding others. Helping others carrying out their tasks instead of pushing the buttons for them is a basic principle for guiding people who struggle with computer systems.

In order to know what the users have learnt during their training, the superusers should also take part in ordinary user training.

Responsibilities and resources

The superuser should be given responsibility of the resources necessary for carrying out the role. The resources for sending users for training, is an obvious responsibility that should be attributed to the superuser.

The superuser is the first person in the support chain. She should handle most of the normal requests dealing with use of the computer system, for which she has received special training. In addition, the superuser should be able to take care of user requests concerning the operating system and standard tools.

Planning of user training

Training with examples based on the work tasks of the users is usually better than context-free teaching. The superusers can provide the trainers with the necessary examples from the users'

daily work, and superusers should therefore be involved in planning of user training and of the support where they play the main roles themselves.

Organizing superusers

In larger organizations, the superusers should be organised in a group so that they can exchange experience. The feeling of belonging to a group may also be important for superusers, since their role is the only ones of its kind amongst those whom they meet daily.

In addition to meetings, e-mail lists, newsgroups and lists of frequently asked questions may also be advantageous.

The organized group should also provide the necessary opportunities for the superusers to update their skills, whether new software or other updates necessitates it.

Communication link

Being parts of the user community, the superusers receive requests for changes of computer systems. They are in a good position to communicate these requests to the computer department or those in charge of the software and hardware. This aspect of their role should be used so that the requests from the users are taken into account. The meeting of superusers could also be an agenda for discussing and distilling such requests.

The superusers could also act as communication link in the opposite direction. When systems updates occur or tools are replaced, the users need to be informed and trained in the altered functionality. The superusers could naturally take on this obligation, and provide small training sessions locally if needed.