

Should You Hire an IT Specialist for Your Club?

By Bill Boothe

With each passing day club computer systems become more powerful and complex, and clubs add computer technology for more departments and personnel. This natural expansion causes an increasing need for technical support. During our work with private clubs across the nation, we are often asked tough questions about technical support: "What level of support does our club require?" "Who should provide that support?" "How do variables such as size, physical layout and systems complexity affect support decisions?" "What are the trends in the private club industry?"

In the past two years we have observed that an increasing number of clubs have added, or are considering adding, a staff position for computer support. For those clubs the questions have become: "What responsibilities should this person have?" "What skills should we be looking for?" "Where do we find such a person?" "What should we expect to pay?"

Our experience in assisting private clubs with systems implementation and the recruiting of technology professionals has provided some important insights into this topic. Let's take a look at the factors involved in structuring a club IT (information technology) position.

When is an IT specialist needed?

We have always stressed the importance of a team approach to technology support. The team includes club management, departmental software champions, outside vendors – and possibly, an IT specialist on the club's staff. Some clubs have assumed that the addition of an IT person will relieve everyone else at the club of systems responsibility. Wrong. Success requires the entire team working together to accomplish the club's IT support goals.

What should an IT specialist do?

While an IT specialist can offer a significant level of support in a number of areas, he/she should not be considered the sole, or even the primary source of support club-wide. To help put this concept in better perspective, we have prepared a pro forma job description for a club IT specialist position. While this description of goals and duties will not fit every club, it should provide some insight into the potential responsibilities of such a position.

Pro Forma Job Description: Club Information Technology Specialist

Reporting: Report to Controller or General Manager.

Goals: Maintain network operations and security; increase user knowledge of desktop software and systems; interface with equipment and software vendors; reduce inefficiency and duplication of effort; maximize usefulness of software and equipment.

Duties:

1. Manage network and POS infrastructure. Maximize performance and reliability of network operations. Maintain system and data security, access control and anti-virus initiatives. Manage e-mail and Internet access systems. Interface with outside vendors as needed to support existing and new technologies.

2. Maintain hardware standards for all users. Maintain and coordinate hardware warranty and maintenance relationship with outside vendor(s). Troubleshoot hardware problems - resolve directly or refer to outside maintenance provider.

3. Maintain desktop software standards for all users. Determine and implement optimum software configurations for user workstations.

4. Manage user desktop support and training for Windows, word processing, spreadsheet, e-mail, Internet and presentation graphics software. Provide user training for desktop software including group, one-on-one and computer-based training, and maintain training facility. Perform proficiency testing of users and set proficiency levels (with management input).

5. Communicate status of IT issues to Club Management and Technology Team. Maintain updated Issues List, and distribute regularly.

6. Work with Software Champions to resolve complex core application software errors or problems (Champions appointed by Management).

7. Serve as the ad hoc report writer Champion. Gain necessary training and experience to fulfill this role.

8. Maintain technical proficiency with on-going professional training.

Where can we find an IT specialist?

When we recruit for this position, we generally place an employment ad in the local newspaper along with an ad on an Internet job posting site (such as www.hotjobs.com or www.monster.com). Depending on your location and job market, you can expect to receive between 50 and 250 responses. Right now there are lots of IT people on the street or looking for a more secure position, as the dot com's continue to dissolve. However, most of these candidates do not possess the experience and temperament needed for this position.

Some clubs have made the mistake of hiring highly technical individuals for this position, only to learn that the people skills needed to support the club's computer users is equal to, if not more important than, the required technical skills. It's difficult to find an individual with sufficient technical expertise to support the club's network servers, switches, hubs, cabling, desktop PC's and printers—and not end up with a "techno geek" incapable of communicating with regular human beings. Here are some tips for finding the multi-talented individual you need:

Small business experience—look for an individual that has held an IT position with at least two small businesses (less than 100 PC's) and likes that environment.

Sole responsibility—look for someone that has had sole IT responsibility for one or more small businesses. Match the pro forma job description above to the experience of the candidates under consideration.

User support or help desk experience—look for an individual who has extensive experience with one-on-one user support—and likes working with beginner and intermediate level users.

Technical credentials—look for someone who has legitimate networking and systems experience—for Novell a CNA and/or CNE certification, for Microsoft an MCSE certification. In the case of Microsoft, you will find many individuals who are currently working their way through the MCSE certification process – which can take a number of years for those who are employed full time. If you are not confident that you can evaluate the technical skills of your candidates, arrange to have the finalists interviewed by a certified professional with a local systems company.

The key to success in hiring an IT specialist is balance between technical and people skills—with a tilt toward people. One question we always ask candidates is: "What did you like most about your previous positions?" If the answer is something like "I really liked playing with new devices and figuring out how things work" then you might be in trouble. If, on the other hand, the answer is something like "I enjoyed getting problems solved and helping users to learn" then you're probably on the right track.

What can we expect to pay?

Depending on the cost of living in your area, and the availability of qualified candidates, you can expect to pay an annual salary

of between \$40,000 and \$80,000 for a qualified IT specialist. In a small community the range is \$40-55K, while in the suburbs of a major city the range is \$50-65K. Clubs located in major cities can expect the range to be \$60-80K. Our experience has shown that this position is often compensated at an amount roughly equivalent to that of the club's controller. Keep in mind that an IT specialist's compensation should be partially offset by a reduction in outside fees for network support, equipment maintenance and user training. Most importantly, this person's compensation is a wise investment in the club's systems and user productivity.

Should we hire a full or part-time person?

If your club has less than 25 PC's and its operations are stable, with few changes planned for the future, a part-time IT specialist might be the answer. There are several approaches to a part-time arrangement:

True Part-Timer – Professionals with small children at home are often looking for a position that will allow them to work 3-4 hours a day. This might be just the ticket for a smaller club with moderate support demands.

Employee Sharing—You might explore with another club in your area the concept of sharing an individual – with certain days of each week assigned to each club. Of course an IT emergency at either club would receive top priority.

We recommend that you not lower your professional expectations for part-timers. They should have the same level of technical and people skills as a full-time employee. Especially, we recommend that you stay away from college students studying IT. They generally lack the business experience needed to be effective.

Industry trends in technology support

The addition and expansion of local and wide area networks, e-mail, Internet access, report writers, highly integrated application software and a host of other elements is making the club technology environment more productive – and more complicated. Many clubs are now struggling with decisions on sources and levels of support. At the same time, clubs are understandably reluctant to add the ongoing labor cost of an IT specialist. Faced with increasing demands for technology support, it's only a matter of time before most clubs will add the needed internal expertise. Our recommendation? Bite the bullet now and hire a part or full-time IT specialist. Such an addition will give your club the professional technology support you need – and help to maximize the return on your technology investment. **BR**

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