The Expert's Opinion

An interview with

John Suess, Director,
University Computing Services,
University of Maryland Baltimore County

An Honors University in Maryland. UMBC is a Carnegie Level II public research university serving approximately 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students pursuing baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degrees.

Interviewed by
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Journal

IRMJ: Yahoo! Internet Life magazine recently listed UMBC as one of "America's 100 Most Wired Colleges." This could only happen with the skillful management of information technology at this university. As the Director of University Computing Services, what are your general responsibilities?

Suess: My general responsibilities revolve around the basic managing responsibilities of planning, budgeting, and staffing. The challenging part of managing University Computing Services is that technology makes each of these activities much more difficult to predict. For example, trying to plan for technology is complicated because of the rapid pace of technological change. The Internet and Web are redefining many services, and in many instances you have to be prepared to change plans as the technology changes. That, then, impacts budgeting for technology. Finally, recruiting and building a staff require tremendous effort.

Having a good staff is still the prerequisite to successful managing. Without a good staff, you can't implement your plans. At the same time, the shortage in technology workers means that it is a worker's market. I know that any of my staff can call up a head hunter and be in a different job in two weeks. As such, I spend a lot of time trying to create a good working environment and trying to identify promising students to work in UCS.

In addition to managing the department, I take a leadership role in architecting the technology infrastructure we use. I am fortunate in that I have had a broad computing background myself. I have worked in the areas of applications programming, systems programming, administration, and network engineering, among others. My responsibility is to make sure we think about technology plans across the enterprise and consider all factors as we develop our plans. As such, support for technology is as important as network infrastructure when deploying new applications to the campus.

IRMJ: What skills are required to be the director of UCS?

Suess: I think the skills needed to be director of UCS fall into three broad categories: people, management, and technical. Information technology touches all aspects of the campus, from instruction and research through administration. As such, the impact of my decisions is felt throughout the enterprise. I spend a tremendous amount of time interacting with constituent groups in different areas and working on campus committees. To be successful in the job, you must be able to relate to people in many different capacities and roles, and you must be able to present highly technical concepts in understandable terms. At the same time, you need to be able to relate to your staff and advocate for solutions that protect their interests.

Management skills fall into the ones associated with developing the planning, budgeting, and staffing models for your department. Budget preparation and planning are time-consuming tasks, but critical to success. Without adequate funding for key initiatives, success is impossible. I have had to learn about how our campus is funded so that I can tap into other sources of financial support and can speak intelligently when talking to our budget director.

Technical skills are important. As the head of a computing department, you need to be knowledgeable on many different technology areas. While it is impossible to be an expert on everything, you need to be knowledgeable enough to speak intelligently when the subject comes up in a meeting. As such, it is important that you have credibility in technology with people inside and outside your department. I love experimenting with new technology and looking for ways that it can benefit the organization. By doing this, I stay up-to-date on technology, and I can take a

leadership role in its dispersion throughout the organization.

IRMJ: How do you keep up with technical developments in the field?

Suess: I read voraciously. I generally read about ten magazines on a regular basis. Most are the free trade publications, but some are paid subscriptions in areas I find I have an interest. When I read the trade publications, I like to pay attention to the advertisements and who is selling what. I also like to look for technologies that are new and that I think have merit. Each year when I review my performance for the past year, I try to pick areas of technology I am weak in and focus learning on that area for next year. I found taking courses at UMBC was very helpful in that regard, and I need to go back and continue that process.

Developing a network of contacts in different technology areas is critical to my success. I often reach out to these contacts, who have more experience in certain technologies, to get their input before making a decision. Finally, I attend perhaps a half-dozen professional meetings each year, such as Internet2, EduCause, and some regional meetings, to stay up to date and keep in touch with key professional contacts in our field.

IRMJ: How do you disseminate knowledge of new information technology products to faculty, staff, and students?

Suess: You can never communicate enough with people. I use a number of different ways. On a personal level, I am on many committees and try to use those committee assignments as a way of interacting with people. Often these meetings provide opportunities to interact one-on-one with people before or after the meeting. While one-on-one communication is the best, you don't reach enough people that way. We send out monthly newsletters through email to our users, update our department web pages, and use training sessions to update people on new ideas.

Officially, UMBC is very lucky that we have a strong shared governance model. I have an excellent relationship with our Faculty Senate Computer Policy Committee and work closely with that group to keep them informed. Beyond that group, I sit on a number of standing committees: Administrative Applications Panel, Technology Enhanced Learning, IT Coordinating Committee, IT Steering, College of Engineering Computing Committee, Institutional Research Advisory Committee, and the UMBC Y2K Task Force.

That said, I think this is an area that I worry most about. Technology is undergoing tremendous change, and it is critical to keep people informed. We are looking at new ways of providing training to people. Our goal is to provide many ways of reinforcing training information for faculty and staff. We've put a lot of effort into training and provide about 150 training classes a year. This fall, we plan to introduce streaming video and CD-ROM training to the campus community. We feel that many people can benefit from just-in-time training, and it is good to practice what we preach!

IRMJ: What are some of the major challenges that you face in your position?

Suess: Lack of time, staying focused, balancing work and home, and meeting varied expectations are the major challenges I face. I find I generally spend about 50 hours a week at the office and then spend another 10-15 hours a week working from home. In my role it is easy to spend every hour of the day in meetings. However, I find I always have two or three hours of e-mail I need to go through each day, so I need to allocate enough time to accomplish the various work activities each day. I also have two small boys, and I try to make them my priority when I'm home, especially on weekends.

By staying focused, I mean that technology can play a role in every aspect of the university. That said, some functions are more critical than others. Keeping focused on those activities that are fundamental to the enterprise and insuring that they are done correctly are critical. Providing help in activities that are not critical is beneficial only if it doesn't come at the expense of your core responsibilities. Learning to say "No" has been difficult, but it is a necessity for the organization to succeed.

Meeting varied expectations is something that is very difficult. Many people on campus feel that they know a lot about information technology and have directions they want the campus to move toward. We can't support everything, and I have to spend time working with people to explain why we chose the direction that we did. What they wanted might make sense in a smaller context, but it may not fit the broader strategic goals of the campus. Occasionally for the good of the campus, we have to make decisions that might have a negative impact on some organizational units. But these are hopefully temporary inconveniences that are overshadowed by the long-term benefits of introducing and supporting cutting-edge information technology into the life of the campus community as a whole.

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