Book Review

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The Reviewers

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Review Subject

Managing Public-access Computers: A How-to-Do-It Manual for Librarians

Donald A. Barclay

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Managing Public-Access Computers is aimed at managers who make critical decisions about public-access computers in libraries and other institutions. The book progresses from explaining technical aspects of computers to discussing management of public computers. Each of the 11 chapters has at least one sidebar that offers additional information about a concept.

In the first chapter, "What does a manager need to know about technology?", the author states that ideally the manager should know both micro and macro levels of computer technology. The rest of the chapter is a glossary of computer terms. Some of them are defined in more detail than others. For example, Windows NT gets a fairly lengthy explanation, whereas Novell Netware gets three sentences and is not really distinguished from NT. Barclay slights Netware despite acknowledging that it is the most popular network operating system.

The second chapter deals with the facilities for housing public workstations. Barclay states that PCs require a minimum of 25 square feet of space and he reminds the reader of the need to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, such as providing adjustable-height computer tables. There has to be sufficient electrical power and network connections to support PCs as well. After covering the pros and cons of sit-down and stand-up terminals, the benefits of following ADA regulations, and the advantages and disadvantages for making classroom PCs available to the public, Barclay presents a useful checklist of requirements for facilities.

Computer hardware is briefly covered in chapter three. The focus is on Intel-based PCs, with only passing reference to the Apple Macintosh. Barclay discusses Random Access Memory, but he does not delve into the various kinds. He talks about CPU speed (without having defined CPU as central processing unit), but gives no mention of bus speed, which has more effect on the overall system speed than does that of the CPU itself. He concludes the chapter by discussing the various aspects of buying hardware.

The next chapter deals with the kinds of software the manager should consider running on public-access computers. Barclay divides software into two categories: application software and system software. Applications are those used by the public, such as Web browsers and word processors. System software includes the operating system and apps such as security packages. He includes a subsection on filtering software and blocking software. The latter is supposed to stop certain behavior

on the Web, such as playing games online.

Chapter five concerns itself with CD-ROMs, which Barclay classifies into three categories: those that are supposed to be "dumped" onto the hard drive; those that run from the CD-ROM drive; and those that require a client program to run from the hard drive to access the disc's data. He touches on the various CD-ROM drives available, from the single workstation drive to the networked CD-ROM jukebox. The usefulness of this chapter is tempered by the author's acknowledgment that the availability of large databases on the internet is starting to displace CDs.

Chapter six covers printing. The author describes the three major kinds of printers (dot-matrix, ink-jet, and laser) and differentiates between networked and stand-alone printers. The balance of the chapter deals with a contentious issue in most libraries: the pros and cons of charging for printing. Barclay includes a checklist for shopping for a pay-to-print system.

Chapter seven briefly covers working with the systems department. Barclay states that the relationship between public services and systems can become adversarial. He sees this conflict arising from the different priorities of both sides. Systems people, apparently, want to lock down all the terminals, whereas public-service staff advocate the rights and needs of all users. The solution is better communication, which may entail the public-service staff's learning more about computers.

Having computers freely accessible to all users can raise security issues, which Barclay discusses in chapter eight. Barclay presents three truths about security: there is no such thing as a secure public-access computer; it is not a matter of "if" but "when" a PC will get trashed; and there can be too much security. He covers physical security and keeping an inventory (with a sample inventory form). He offers tricks that can be used to secure software on a public workstation, such as adding a password for accessing the BIOS.

Chapters nine and ten deal with library staffing issues and training, respectively. The library reference staff are the ones who help patrons with using computers to access information, whereas the computer staff only install and maintain hardware and software. One has to determine how much help a reference person should give for computer-related questions. Part of this is determined by how much the computers are used. Barclay mentions some tracking software, which allows one to monitor computer use. He also has a form which can be used to track computer usage by hand. Chapter ten deals more with communicating with the staff and training them. Barclay suggests having training sessions and possibly videotaping them for those who cannot attend.

The final chapter deals with user relations. Barclay describes posting use policies and the importance of signage. Barclay indicates that feedback from users is often mainly negative, and the library staff needs to know how to handle it.

On the whole, this book serves as a good introduction for librarians just starting to be involved with public access to PCs. One criticism is that some of the explanations of technology are a little weak. Since the book is written from the perspective of public service, it might be useful for systems people to read in order to better interact with their non-technical colleagues.