Staffing the 21st Century Psychology Department

January 19, 2005

Earlier this year our department had a day-long retreat to discuss, among other things, what it might look like if we recreated it from scratch. During a particularly scintillating discussion of the merits of having four areas versus five, I found my mind wandering to the far more important issue of how I would staff such a department. Most of us work in psychology departments that matured in a very different era. Not surprisingly, we find ourselves living with staffing patterns that clearly reflect times and needs that are but dim remembrances of things long past.

Vestiges of the 20th Century
Next time you venture out from the confines of your office, look around. Welcome to the remnants of the 20th century. In this era, psychology departments were staffed to accomplish three primary goals: 1) production of the written word (a.k.a. consuming mass quantities of trees); 2) managing money (a.k.a. protecting ourselves from our own fiscal peccadilloes); and 3) gizmo construction.

The written word – regardless of whether its final destination was correspondence, articles, grant applications, or whatever – began life as ink on paper. This took the form of pages of hand-scrawled text or crude typing replete with overtypes; multi-key letter clumps; endless strings of X's blotting out bad ideas; egregious spelling; inelegant phrases; and lines of snaking text located anywhere and everywhere with slash-arrows pointing to completely ambiguous insertion points. Staff with amazing psychic powers and remarkable typing skills would turn these stacks of ugliness and doubt into pages of clean, confident text served up on the crispest imaginable sheets of bond paper. These would be "corrected" using a dizzying progression of technologies that evolved from erasers, to erasable bond paper, to correction "fluid," to typewriters capable of whisking away dark characters with ease. The important thing is that only departmental staff were entrusted with producing the final version and any and all copies that followed thereafter. Today's era of academician as totally self-sufficient word-processor and copier maven was unimaginable.

Money managing was in the hands of extremely detail-conscious masters of double-entry. Entering tiny numbers by hand on multi-columned pages and performing remarkable feats of calculation, they used only their brains and the occasional hand-cranked adding machine. The latter made an instantly recognizable and soothing symphony, as thin metal fingers extended and contracted to create the myriad shapes that represented the numbers being crunched. These virtuosos of fiscal derring-do worked in darkened offices with no natural sunlight, behind doors that were never more than slightly ajar, and they – and only they – could tell you how much you had coming, had on hand, or owed. What they really thought about your gross fiscal incompetence would never be known, for like great poker players, their faces never conveyed a flicker of judgment.

Finally, there were the "shops," traditionally located in the bowels of the building, far away from prying eyes. There the tools and materials for crafting (and constantly tweaking and repairing) the great gizmos of 20th century psychology could be found. The staff were masters of the dark arts of metal cutting and

bending, wood sawing and shaping, soldering and fluxing, and a variety of skills related to wiring (wrapping, harnessing, circuit boarding). But if you got to know them and gained their trust, you were granted admission into a Vernes-ian world of fantasy and creativity. Huge human-like figures were animated for holiday parades; electromagnetic principles were harnessed to create things that appeared to levitate in mid air; new ultrasonic and infrared technologies were used to detect motion and control things from afar; and there was always a blue spark or two that was being hurled 20 feet across the room (often targeting an unsuspecting beetle, bug, or assistant).

The Fin De Siecle

Personal computers with their spreadsheets, word processors, and accounting programs; rapid copying equipment; the abandonment of paper and the warm embrace of electronic copies, forms, and publications; and laboratory computers interfaced with highly-reliable general purpose miniaturized electronic equipment all spelled the end of the duty cycle of the 20th century psychology department staff.

A Design for the 21st Century

Let's start with the premise that the ultimate goal of psychology department staffing is to relieve faculty from burdensome, time-consuming tasks and thus facilitate their research, teaching, and other activities. (I know, you're wondering what planet I've been living on – but remember, this is supposed to be a humorous column.) Given this assertion, I now offer a top-10 (plus one) staffing wish list for the 21st century psychology department:

1. *Caffeinator*. We all need to wake up. It takes a lot of time everyday for us to find that ideal beverage.
2. *Cultural Reference Translator*. If we stay at this long enough, the age gap between us and our students will eventually exceed 40 years. Someone has to tell us to swap Marshall Mathers for Dean Martin and Tupac for Tallulah. Voila! Once again you've got 'em rolling in the aisles.
3. *Adjectivator*. So many letters of recommendation, so few descriptors. Bidirectionality is a virtue. Give them the name, they give us the adjectives. Give them the adjectives, they write the letter!
4. *Rebooter*. Before Windows XP, the typical PC user rebooted every two hours – and each reboot takes lots of valuable time. Modeled on those drones who tune guitars for big-time rock bands, a newly booted computer set up with our programs and data should be swapped in the minute ours crashes.
5. *Stewartizer*. Our offices are decorator nightmares – no wonder we want to work at home and have our meetings at Starbucks. We need help matching furniture, choosing paint colors, and selecting wall hangings. It's a good thing!
6. *Mix and Matcher*. Nobody can get their PDA, cell phone, home computer, office computer, laptop, internet connection, and printer to work together. WiFi and USB just make everything worse. And if they can't get this stuff to work, could I at least get one of those 20 foot spark throwers?
7. *Chiropractor/Osteopath/Masseuse*. Is there any academic over the age of 40 who doesn't have a bad back?
8. *Personal Dresser*. Admit it, don't you just hate the "all-Dockers-all-the-time" look?
9. *Matchmaker*. Academic life is hard on relationships, and there just isn't time to meet anyone. We need help – listings on match.com for a "55-year-old academic with a *really* large vita" just aren't going to cut it.

10. *I-Podder*. I've worn the grooves out on my Chet Baker LPs and don't have time to download a new set of MP3s every day.
11. *Googler*. I don't care how smart the algorithm is and how high the post-IPO stock value has climbed, I still get 10 pages of "matches" every time I try to look up "Fin de Siecle."

A department staffed like this – now that would get me to work on time. …

Please feel free to crank up your creative juices and send your comments and/or additional 21st century staffing ideas: rlevenson@psychologicalscience.org*.*