solarwinds

Saint Mary's College Takes the Frustration Out of Tech Support for Students and Staff

Higher education institution relies on SolarWinds® Web Help Desk® ticketing and asset management software to provide better service to its users.

CHALLENGE	OUTCOME
Implement an affordable, seamless, self-service ticket system to support the technology needs of 1,600 students	• 500% increase in ticket submissions • System expansion to serve 500 staff/faculty members

Voicemails and Post-it® notes—that's how requests for tech support were processed in 2001 when Kathy Hausmann arrived at Saint Mary's College, a Catholic liberal arts college located in Notre Dame, Indiana. Back then, an automated tracking system didn't exist at the institution.

Now, as Associate Director of Technology Support Services, Hausmann has seen the college transition from 100% wired devices to 96% wireless network connectivity in the residence halls, and witnessed the popularity of Macs among students increase from being 10% of registered computers on the network to 70%.

During her first month on campus, Hausmann developed a tracking system using a web frontend designed in HTML and CDML with a FileMaker® Pro database on the backend. Due to budget constraints at the time, building an in-house system was preferred over commercial software.

The home-grown solution was certainly a big improvement when compared to the previous manual process, which lasted for many years. But as student technology quickly evolved, Saint Mary's "ResNet" team needed a system that could keep up.

"We wanted features beyond what I could create," Hausmann said, "such as LDAP integration, email notifications, and status reminders." SolarWinds Web Help Desk ticketing and asset management software met all this criteria and more, according to Hausmann.

ResNet – A network and team of students helping students.

ResNet is the name for both the student computer network on Saint Mary's campus and the team that supports it. The team, ResNet Computer Consultants, is made up of five to eight students and is supervised by one of IT's 14 staff members.

The ResNet team assists any student, whether living on- or off-campus, full-time or part-time, who requests help with technology during the academic year. (The Helpdesk team provides tech support to faculty and staff.)

> " *The Web Help Desk solution saves time, but beyond time and money, it provides an easy-to-use method for students to request technology support assistance and a frustration-free way for the ResNet staff to keep up to date with tickets and offer better service overall to our student population.* "
>
> — Kathy Hausmann, Associate Director of Technology Support Services, Saint Mary's College

The ResNet Office's most common support requests include trouble with network connectivity, assistance with email accounts, recommendations for computer purchases, software installation, and malware removal.

Hausmann first discovered the SolarWinds Web Help Desk solution through the ResNet listserv. This listserv includes international membership dedicated to online discussions on topics that affect student technology on and beyond college and university campuses.

WHAT SAINT MARY'S WAS LOOKING FOR IN A TRACKING SYSTEM

The Helpdesk team, providing support to faculty and staff, first needed a new tracking system, and the search began in 2007, according to Hausmann. With a "wish list" from the IT staff in hand, she began the discovery phase, researching products with features to fulfill their dreams.

SolarWinds Web Help Desk was one of the products considered and demonstrated at that time. However, the search stopped when IT discovered that an already-in-place broader system management solution had unused tracking system capabilities, though those tracking options were never enabled.

For the ResNet team, the search for a solution began in 2013 when replacing the existing File-Maker Pro-based system became critical. "That system was on a computer running Mac OS® 9.2.2—Apple's latest operating system then was Mac® OS X® version 10.8—and I no longer had replacement hardware available," Hausmann explains.

In fact, this legacy technology kept her up at night. "I was concerned the server hosting our ResNet tracking system, a PowerMac G4, also with Mac OS® 9.2.2, would fail," Hausmann said. "We previously had a hard drive crash, but with no significant data loss. Backups of the database and HTML/CDML files were manually copied to a flash drive."

Primary criteria for the new tracking system was LDAP integration, automated email notifications, and a web interface to allow students to submit their own support requests.

"Based on the earlier demos, I really liked Web Help Desk. Even as I researched other options, they could not compare to Web Help Desk's features," she said.

SOLUTION "MAD LIBS": WEB HELP DESK WAS CHOSEN BECAUSE ____.

Hausmann has a list of reasons why the SolarWinds solution was chosen over others:

» It meets all the previously mentioned "must haves"

» The interface is user-friendly and effortlessly customized

» A hover feature provides a view of the latest note without opening the ticket

» Email is enabled with one click on the student's name

» A dashboard provides immediate, at-a-glance information about the most common support requests

solarwinds

In terms of the solution's additional capabilities, she noted, "Since the system is for students' personally owned computers, asset tracking and remote management—while valuable features of Web Help Desk—are not necessary for us."

EASY IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation time—from server setup and testing with the ResNet Computer Consultants to go live—was about four months. In particular, Hausmann focused on testing the layouts to ensure they worked to the team's specifications.

"I gave the student workers 'assignments' to test the system, starting with creating new tickets for themselves, then creating tickets on behalf of users," she explained. "They also changed ticket priorities and resolution and gave feedback on the documentation I wrote. The product setup is quite intuitive, and with SolarWinds' online resources, I was easily able to configure it. We officially switched from the old FileMaker Pro system to Web Help Desk during spring break."

According to Hausmann, the ResNet team offered positive feedback throughout testing and implementation, commenting on how easy navigation and use was when compared to the previous system.

5 YEARS AND A 500% INCREASE IN TICKETS MEANS WE'RE DOING SOMETHING RIGHT

Measuring IT success by a rise in the number of support tickets might seem counterintuitive, but for Saint Mary's College, a 500% increase in five years shows how well the solution is working.

"The old FileMaker Pro ticketing system was much more frustrating; users complained a lot. Still, it was quite a surprise to see just how much our support numbers grew," Hausmann said. "While we've made tweaks since implementation, such as adding custom fields, updating request types, and reorganizing FAQs, our Web Help Desk ResNet tracking system is reliable and continues to meet our needs."

FEATURES IN USE

Custom fields: class year, mobile phone number, device type, device brand, operating system, and type of network connection

Request types (including subtypes): designed to allow easier issue reporting by students and easier support issues summaries to administration

Responsive pop-ups, so if a student requests a manual registration, a custom field for the device's Mac address will appear, but won't appear for any other request type

Prioritizes "types" and "alerts," used to track time required for response and frequency of follow-ups

Action rules to auto-assign specific issues to IT staff (tickets with no response, networking, hardware issues)

Action rules to auto-assign new submitted tickets to student staff

Action rules to update priority of all new submitted tickets to "medium" regardless of priority at submission

Action rules to update priority of response time for all online graduate student tickets

FAQs appear as request types to be selected during new ticket submission

LDAP integration for pulling in contact/location information

Customized layout of group tickets for quick status overview

Other benefits for the team included responsive pop-up menus describing potential issues helping ease and lessen tickets submitted with the less descriptive type of "Other."

The ability to hover a mouse over a field, see the latest notes, and make updates at a glance is "an unexpected benefit and a big time-saver" when compared to loading a ticket, editing a field, and saving and closing.

Preserving even more time, the ResNet team also utilizes "priorities and alert levels," which provide a color-coded view of ticket follow up frequency. They no longer have to open every ticket to understand this status.

The ResNet team uses existing queries to generate reports as requested and as required for academic year end, when the quantity of tickets and types of issues addressed are shared with the CIO and Provost. Reporting time was reduced from a full day to less than one hour.

For students, ticket submission was greatly simplified. After signing in, contact information is pre-populated; only a mobile phone number must be entered.

THE HELPDESK TEAM ALSO GETS A NEW TRACKING SYSTEM

Web Help Desk has been so successful for the ResNet team and the students it supports, Hausmann said, that it was implemented for the Helpdesk team and customized to support faculty and staff as well.

"I've recommended Web Help Desk to my peers in the past, and will continue to do so," she said. "The price is affordable, the product does exactly what it claims to do, and the customizations are intuitive and straightforward to implement—no programming necessary."