Working in a Small Church IT Shop

Written by Hyrum Haynes
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When someone thinks of IT and the Church, they probably think of the large, complex environment at the Church's downtown SLC campus, with a staff of dedicated IT professionals in many different specialties. Or perhaps they would think of the more modest technical needs of local units, area and mission offices, seminaries and institutes, MTCs, or temples. Indeed, the Church has technical needs wherever it has a presence. Those needs vary according to the function and size of the particular location.

I am privileged to have worked at LDS Philanthropies (formerly LDS Foundation) for the last 18 years, first as a Technical Service Representative (TSR) and now as a software engineer. I have seen this department grow in size and change in technology. LDS Philanthropies (LDSP) is a department of the Office of the Presiding Bishopric and is responsible for philanthropic donations to the Church and its affiliated charities, including the Church's educational institutions. We maintain the donor records for these charities, as well as the alumni databases (but not educational records) of BYU, BYU-Idaho, BYU-Hawaii, and LDS Business College. The database resides on an IBM System i (AS/400) located in the BYU Data Center. The AS/400, along with the Ascend database, was chosen in 1990 because it was the best system then available to support the needs of LDS Foundation.

So what is different about IT at LDSP, compared to overall Church IT? We are a small IT shop and I believe it is the many hats we wear that make us different. We have four developers who are involved in various programming projects and tasks, and who maintain a highly customized database. Because of our location and close affinity with BYU, we are on the BYU network and use our own desktop. Because of LDSP's unique IT environment, we run our own help desk. And since we have only one full-time TSR and two student support employees, the developers often have to help out with tech support. Even our tech support personnel have to perform tasks outside of their job descriptions. Since we don't fit the mold of the narrow job descriptions of normal Information and Communications Systems (ICS) positions, Church ICS sometimes has difficulty understanding us. By necessity, the scope of our responsibilities is very broad, even though our ICS job descriptions aren't.

So what are our responsibilities? What tasks are we, as a small IT department, performing? Basically, if it has anything to do with technology for LDSP, we're involved. This includes PC/Mac hardware and software, IBM System i administration, Windows server and Web site administration and support, database maintenance and support, software development (analysis, design, code, test, debug, maintain), reports and data extractions, documentation and training, network and e-mail, user access, printers, hardware and software inventory, PDAs, telephones, cell phones, scanners, cameras, televisions, DVD players, PA systems, technology research and purchasing, and help desk support for all of the above. We are even sometimes asked to move furniture and boxes or unload trucks.

The most important thing, of course, is to ensure that the users' needs are being met—whether or not the requested task is in our job description. In our view, our real job is to support LDS Philanthropies in any way needed, not just to perform our "assigned" roles. So in our office, you will rarely hear "That's not my job." We just do it.

Our work is challenging in scope, but never dull and always rewarding. We never know from

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day to day what we will be asked to do. But it is very exciting to be part of an organization which affects so many lives for the better. That is what keeps us going. And isn't that true of all of us who are engaged in the work of the Lord?

(For more information about LDS Philanthropies, see www.ldsphilanthropies.org *and see related article,*
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