

Review of Worcester Polytechnic Institute's Help Desk Website

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I. Choice for the Review

I wanted to review the Help Desk Website of a University or College, but in order to do an effective and unbiased review, I decided to avoid those schools which I have attended. Hence, I randomly chose Worcester Polytechnic Institute's (henceforth WPI) site from a **Google** search¹.

II. Criteria for this Review

We shall evaluate the WPI Help Desk Website on several criteria², which can be broadly categorized under two main descriptions: Form and Function. While discussing the form category of the Website, we'll discuss its general layout, insofar as we believe that a Help Desk Website's appearance should be inviting and undaunting to even the most basic end user. Hence we'll briefly discuss such details as *font, colours, navigability*, accessibility of *contact details, spacing* etc., in the context of how the Website's appearance facilitates the process of Incident resolution. Of course, content and utility are what matter most, and thus we'll devote the majority of our Review to Functionality. We'll concentrate on such issues as *Search Filters, FAQ, End-user self service, multiple modes of contact, Escalation, and Support Automation*².

III. Review

i) Form

The layout of the WPI Help Desk site is relatively plain and simple. It certainly is non-threatening. From an aesthetic point of view, it leaves something to be desired, but on the whole, it certainly provides the end user with a helpful and useful interface.

Specifically:

- The traditional font and use of a minimal number of colours certainly aren't distracting.
- The spacing is somewhat poor. It gives the site a "crowded" feel. This is a minor shortcoming in the larger scheme of things.
- The "life preserver" icon is both charming and reassuring. This is definitely a way of reaching out to especially trepidatious and naïve end users.
- The contact details aren't quite as conspicuous as one might like, given that they are placed at the bottom of the page. There is however, a link in the Left side panel, under Support and Services that provides full details for multiple methods of contact.
- The Combo Box in the upper Left side panel is extremely helpful for Support Automation.
- All of the Links are current and in working condition. The site is easily navigable.
- There is no direct link to a FAQ page, however many topics (UNIX, Email etc.) all have thorough and well illustrated (pictorially and verbally) FAQ sections. These explanations are written in a manner such that even a novice user could understand them.

ii) Function

We shall now discuss the functionality of the WPI Help Desk Site. First, the site emphasizes Support Automation as way to facilitate assistance of end users and facilitate the providers (IT staff) of that assistance. As mentioned above, there is a Combo Box in the upper left corner of the site that categorizes the end user (student, teacher etc.)

Moreover, when an end user attempts to email the IT Web Master regarding issues with a RPI web page etc., he/she is compelled to provide his/her name, ID number and other contact/background information.

To provide End-User Self Service, there is a plethora of links, relating to a wide variety of issues ranging from UNIX and Web development to Computing and Software issues. There is enough information presented in Links from the Home page so that a sophisticated or even intermediate end user would probably be able to resolve most issues after simply reading and applying the information presented. One could surmise that even a novice user could use the FAQ sections of the linked topics to resolve most issues. Consider for example, setting up and customizing an email account. The limitations and features are discussed so thoroughly, that one cannot conceive of even the most basic user not being able to set up his/her account.

Of course if an end user cannot resolve his/her issue, there are a variety of remedies offered. These involve multiple methods of contact. An end user may submit his/her question via an online form, contact an IT professional during Office Hours, or even discuss the issue face to face with an IT professional at the Physical Help desk location, during Office hours. (We realize that this third option is not usually available outside of Academia!)

We cannot adequately answer the question regarding issues of Escalation, given that we would have had to have submitted an incident ourselves. We can only conjecture, given the quality and efficacy of the site, that very few incidents would require Escalation.

Finally we attempted the following two searches using the WPI Help Desk Search Filter: *“How do I block Spam?”* and *“What free Software is available to Students?”* I received two results to the first (somewhat poorly worded) query, the first of which led to a complete explanation regarding RPI Email Spam Filter, the second led to a very

thorough FAQ regarding SPAM. The second query wasn't as fruitful. I did receive two matches, however it appears that either no free Software is available to students, or to find such a link, I'd have to modify my query! The upshot is that the Search Filter appears to be very useful, and yet another powerful tool to provide End-User Self service and reduce Escalation.

iii) Conclusion

I really couldn't find anything I disliked about the site. It seems the students at WPI are extremely well served by their IT department. This Help Desk Site is very useful, thorough and effective. By providing a limited yet complete home page, with a link for every conceivable IT issue relating to the University, this Help Desk seems just about perfect!

IV. Notes and References (Bibliography)

1. The Help Desk Website I reviewed:

Worcester Polytechnic Institute. CCC Helpdesk. <http://www.wpi.edu>. Retrieved February 20, 2008, from <http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/CCC/Help/>

2. My Criteria were based on my research on Help Desk Software and Help Desk Website reviews I found on the Web. I would like to state that there is a dearth of such reviews! I did find two sites to more useful than the rest, and gleaned my review criteria from them. Moreover, the definitions of terms used in the Function criteria are taken directly from the 1st source below:

Info Tech Research Group. (2006). *Selection Advice*. Retrieved February 17, 2008, from <http://www.infotech.com/samples/Info-Techs%20Guide%20to%20HelpDesck%20Software%20RFP's.pdf>

Smith, Allen and Douris, Avril. (2005). *Good & Bad Helpdesk Websites*. Retrieved February 17,2008,from <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/ics/projects/documents/nipb/misc/sdim111805websites.pdf>

3. In addition, we used the following websites as references:

ZaZaNetwork. Help Desk Software Reviews. *ZaZaChatTM*. Retrieved February 17,2008, from http://www.zazachat.com/kb/live_chat_software/articles/help_desk_software_reviews.aspx

LIVETIME. Choosing a Help Desk. *Livetime.com*. Retrieved February 19, 2008, from <http://www.livetime.com/webservicedesk/Choosing.html>

University of Cambridge. Technical User Support. <http://www.cam.ac.uk/> Retrieved February, 18,2008 from <http://www-tus.csx.cam.ac.uk/hdesk/>

Czegel, Barabara. Running an effective Help Desk Website, 2nd Edition (Sample). <http://www.wiley.com>. Retrieved February 17, 2008 from <http://www.wiley.com/legacy/compbooks/czegel/>