

DEVELOPING A SUPPORT STAFF

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In the wake of budget cutbacks and reorganization, staff reduction seems to be happening in more institutions. Even with new facilities staffing of full time professionals is minimal in most cases. Many operations could make much better use of part time and volunteer help besides restricting their contributions to “console operating.” Most of those people want something that is more challenging and helpful to their own personal and professional development, and with proper training they can provide valuable support to a planetarium’s operation.

I occasionally hear the excuse that “It takes more time to show them what to do and get them to do it right than it would to just do it myself!” While this may be true for certain complex tasks, I see it more a symptom of crisis management. Finding and training good “auxiliary” help takes time. So plan out a workable schedule for both of you, and in time they will be able to take on more serious responsibilities. If you give them more meaningful things to do, they’ll find the work more fulfilling, and you’ll eventually have more productivity.

So how do we create a good auxiliary staff, and where do we find them? –

Part-timers.

Someone who is already involved with the operation on a regular, paid basis can be developed into more meaningful roles. The first step is simple: have a little informal meeting to discuss their personal and professional goals, their schedule, their other commitments, and so on. There must be a good “win-win” situation developed for them to feel motivated into taking on more responsibilities. While many part-timers may be in the operation for running shows and other presentations, they can also learn (depending on their talents) to help with:

1. Basic systems diagnostics and maintenance

2. Slide production
3. Visuals research
4. Creation of graphics/artistic visuals
5. Resources management
6. Special effects construction
7. Workshop/class instruction

The key here is all about training. Don't just shove them a manual or spend a couple of hours showing them what to do and then leave them to their own devices. That sends the image of "I don't care enough about you to spend the time necessary to help you do a good job." Set up a regular training schedule and give them the techniques, insight, reasoning and professional viewpoint required to do the job right.

Yes, I hear your other concern as well: what if I don't have the budget to pay them for the extra hours these duties would require? Then split their time up so some of the hours they used to spend operating shows are spread out with others, like:

Volunteers.

Many of the duties listed above can also work for volunteers. The key is finding the right talents for what you need, so acquire them the same way you would a paid staff: write up a job description and do an interview! Just because someone comes to you looking for a "cool" place to volunteer doesn't necessarily mean they're going to be of great help or find the job meaningful. Look for a good match.

We have several volunteers who help us do shows, but we train them well in the methods of public presentation and being a good representative, rather than "console operator" (I dislike that term anyway – it gives me and probably the person in the job the impression of a mindless blob of protoplasm sitting in a lump pushing buttons and not trusted to do anything else...).

We also run volunteers through the same training process a "part-timer" would get in the sense of dealing with minor "situations"; diagnosing and solving simple technical or logistical problems.

Student Help.

These may be high school or college, paid or volunteer, work-study or independent study credit. Of course, if your planetarium is already connected to a school, these positions can be developed much more readily, but they should also be explored even if you're a private or government institution.

Some of our most enthusiastic and productive help has come from students, and if you can establish a clear set of *goals and benefits* for THEM as well as you, then the advantages for both sides are clearly seen and it becomes a valuable work experience. Again, probe them well in the interview and reference check process – make sure you have a good match in terms of attitude, work ethic, career goals, etc., but also let them probe your operation as well. It needs to go both ways so that each is satisfied with what they're getting into. Advertise in the right departments: science education, theatre arts, communications, etc. You may even want to consider teaching a class about planetarium operations (twice I taught one in Alamosa, Colorado, while an undergraduate – if nothing else it was great for heightening visibility, fostering better interdepartmental relations, and widening the usefulness of your facility to the school, especially in the eyes of your administrators).

Internships.

These can be formal or informal, paid or voluntary. If you've ever run across that unique student that shows an exceptional aptitude for program production or presentation, consider creating an internship program for him or her. I've had a few that became so valuable it was like having another salaried professional on staff! Of course it doesn't happen overnight; it takes time, patience, training, trust, encouragement, sacrifice, compromise. But what you give them in terms of mentoring comes back in precious help, making it well worth the effort. Remember that a planetarium's educational mission can and should be met in ways additional to simply "giving shows." Share something of yourself and your operation with others; who knows, they may end up making a career in science (I've had several now who have!).

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