CNS/Update Newsletter Feature

A Day In the Life

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A Day In the Life

"Good morning -- data center." Receptionist Joella Walz speaks into the telephone receiver, and her words mark the start of a day in the life at the NERDC front office. Throughout the red brick building on UF's Stadium Road, other NERDC support groups vital to customer service are gearing up as well.

Receptionist Joella Walz greets callers to NERDC.

In the accounting office, Queen Smith toggles the power switch on her IBM PC and connects to NERTPX via TCP/IP. Her co-worker, Miryam Braun, launches the networked application the office uses for accounts payable.

Queen Smith helps customers with billing questions, account information, and password changes.

At NERDC Operations, 8 a.m. is one of three daily changes of the guard. Fresh faces appear next to the cartridge tape drives, in the tape library, and at the main console, where system monitors cover most of two walls. In a wing next to the machine room where the NERSP, NERVM and NERMVS computers live, Jerry Smith is about to feed the Datagraphix XL500, a machine that scrunches data onto 4-inch by 6-inch visual records known as microfiche....

In this recounting, these employees-and others yet to be introduced -- assist actual customers as well as the busy mythical NERDC patron "PowerUser," who makes appearances to illustrate
services commonly provided by NERDC support staff.

Tropical Storm Josephine is not yet born, but front office manager Kristiina Butler, as head of NERDC's Hurricane Preparedness Committee, is bracing for rough weather that could affect NERDC services to the university community. She is visiting area police and fire stations, as well as an electric utility, to see how other organizations handle emergency preparedness.

In her office, Administrative Assistant Yvonne Dumas reviewed procedures that enabled network staff to be "on call" 24 hours a day, in order to respond quickly to Internet routing outages or problems with the campus "backbone" network.

The tempo of the morning increases.

PowerUser has called nine times already; twice with Internet questions; twice to get her password changed (once on NERSP and once for the password database that covers all other NERDC systems); once to Operations, to inquire about the status of an MVS batch job; and four times to the Support Desk.

Now, she is on the phone to Operations again:

"I can't do anything! My terminal locked up."

Operator Lisa Redwine has taken the call. "What system are you using?" she inquires.

"Hmmm. Well, I have five different sessions going."

Redwine pulls up a Web-based utility written by former Support Desk staffer Mauro Marzorati. The internal utility checks all NERDC systems to see where PowerUser is logged on. Redwine may have to recycle PowerUser's terminal, or bump her off VM or NERSP, to put
her back in business.

Meanwhile, Jerry Smith has begun a 350-microfiche job for Information Systems at Tigert Hall. For the benefit of an observer, he calculates how much information is involved.

Jerry Smith sets up an imaging cycle on the microfiche equipment.

"Let's see, multiply 350 by 270, the number of pages that fit on one fiche, gives us a total of 94,500 pages with up to 88 lines apiece...."

Now Miryam Braun in accounting is on the telephone with PowerUser:

"You say you'd like to start a new encumbrance, add two users to your account, and check the origin of two charges on your last bill?"

Miryam Braun in accounting, looks up an encumbrance record.

"Normally you send encumbrance requests to Finance and Accounting, but if this is urgent, you can fax me a copy now; to add new users, please send me a memo; and I'll run a charge listing for those items on your bill and call you back." Queen Smith, her co-worker, is also busy on the phone with a department representative. Due to an error in the department's encumbrance record, the department was trying to pay its bills with another organization's funds. Smith finds the error and explains to the representative how to resolve the situation.
In the machine room, Computer Operator Nancy Freimuth works the tape drives. NERDC stores about 24,000 cartridges, and there are 16 tape drives to feed them into, as well as two 9-track tape drives to handle the occasional requests for mounts using 10-inch reels.

Nearby monitors display requests for a unique cartridge, as specified by the customer, and the number of the drive that will read it. Freimuth watches tape requests appear, one after the other. She heads for the racks, grabs a tape in each hand, sets the individual thumbwheels -- read only, or read/write, per job instructions -- slides the cartridges home, closes the drive shutters, and spins around to get more tapes. Then she has to re-store the media after the system has loaded what it needs. It's a job where rhythm is quite helpful.

"It's an important service, and users depend on it," says Freimuth. "Tigert Hall, the libraries, and Criser Hall are among our biggest tape customers."

1:30 p.m.-Debra Harris of Smathers Libraries, a frequent visitor to NERDC, arrives and greets Senior Operator Tina Holmes through the tape library's bank teller-type window. Harris has several 10-inch reels she wants converted to cartridges, and Holmes is happy about this. "We encourage customers to switch," she said. "Cartridges hold more data than reel tapes, and are more reliable. The magnetic tape on open reels gets oxidized. This rust can contaminate our reel-to-reel drives, and corrupt data. We've had people bring in 30-year-old reels to mount. We run them through a tape cleaning machine first, and hope for the best." Bill Carr, operations supervisor, adds, "We used to have a roomful of reel-to-reel drives. Now we're down to two. They are time-consuming to clean and maintain."

It's 2 p.m. In NERDC's reference library, Tarrie Van Horn chairs the weekly meeting of NERDC Support Desk consultants. At these meetings, consultants share information about system changes or problems, new documentation, and discuss current user problems. Student consultant Brad Biglow comments, "I often help people with NERDC services who don't know where to go for help. If I can't solve a problem myself, I refer them to specific experts inside or outside NERDC."

2:30 p.m.-... big job indeed. Jerry Smith's big job is "stuck" on microfiche number 263 of 350, apparently because of a memory problem. "I've tried every trick I know," he exclaims, "like clearing the buffer and restarting the job, but it's no go..."
David Kennedy, one of NERDC's part-time student consultants, talks with a customer trying to connect to his NERVM account with "generic" telnet software. Part of the problem, Kennedy determines, is that the generic telnet doesn't provide a <Clear> key, vital for navigating VM. He asks the customer to search his hard drive for a tn3270 client. The search succeeds. Minutes later the customer is connecting to VM, and is very grateful.

"Our goal," says Support Desk Coordinator Van Horn, "is to provide a climate where customers at all levels of expertise feel comfortable asking us for help."

3 p.m.-Joella Walz has spoken to about 50 NERDC customers by now, and PowerUser is on the phone once again.

"Hello NERDC, there's a few things I would like a hand with. I have a four-color map on a Sun workstation in the architecture building. Can I send you the file over the Internet, and print it on your Versatec plotter? Also, I need some help writing parallel code for a research project on the NERSP; and could you tell me where in the print queue the MVS job I sent is, and help me fix my e-mail? I keep getting a message that says, 'Threshold Exceeded.'"

"Sure," Walz says, "may we help you with the e-mail first?"

3:30 p.m.-Jerry Smith and programmer Larry Kennell discuss strategy to overcome the memory problem with the microfiche machine. "What if I copy records 263 through 350 to a new tape," Larry proposes, "and then you restart the job as a new job, but tell the Datagraphix to begin numbering the fiches at 263? Will that work?"

4:30 p.m.-Kennell has written some quick code to copy the microfiche records. Smith feeds in the data and runs the program. It works! Today, he'll finish laser-imaging the master microfiches. Tomorrow, he'll start making the duplicate microfiches, a separate photographic process involving ammonia, ultraviolet light, and heat.

Tomorrow is another day.

Your Comments are Welcome

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this and all UFIT documentation. Please send
your comments to:

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