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Empower Your SharePoint Power Users

How much energy have you invested in supporting SharePoint? Have you been asked to help add a column, define a list, or share some advice on the best way to do something in SharePoint? If you have, you're not alone. IT departments that are implementing SharePoint are finding out that users have a lot of surprising questions. Whether it's a rise in Help desk calls, the tackling that IT folks get in the halls, or just the occasional phone call that interrupts the day, there is a definite drive to create SharePoint solutions in most places where it's been installed.

So the question you should be asking yourself is "How do I make it stop?" Or, more precisely, "How do I give users what they need and still have time to do my job?" What you need is an army -- an army of people who can spread the load so that, instead of dozens of questions, you rarely get one at all. Enter the power user. This is a mythical creature of dread for some organizations and a champion of IT in others. When enabled correctly SharePoint power users can give all of the users better support and simultaneously reduce your load building solutions and answering questions. Here's how to do it.

Step 1: Create a power users group

Recognizing people is generally a quick way to get them on your side. Everyone wants and needs to be special. Including them in a group of their peers where they're recognized as being a power user is a huge ego stroke and a quick way to start the process of getting everyone on board.

Of course, you'll probably already know who some of the power users are -- however, there are likely many more who you aren't aware of, so ask. Send a message throughout the management of the organization indicating that you're forming a new group of power users to receive special attention and support. Let them know you'd like for them to nominate the people within the organization who would most benefit from the special attention – and from whom they feel like they can get the most support after the training.

With a list of names in hand, it's just a matter of putting things together and getting a meeting together. Of course, not every organization can actually gather the members of the group into one location. However, to create a sense of community you want to do your level best to gather as many folks as possible into at least a video conference. Whether you're able to get everyone together or not, you will definitely want to create a special SharePoint site for the group.

Before moving on, don't get discouraged if you've tried something like this in the past and it didn't work. You're armed with a plan now and you'll make this work. Try to convince management, if they''re hesitant, by explaining what you're going to do, the actions you're going to take to make this time different, and of course what the benefits are.

Step 2: Define the group's objective

Gathering a group of people in and of itself doesn't mean anything meaningful will happen. You have to define your objectives -- and define them from the perspective of what's in it for the participants. Although your ultimate goal might be to reduce the number of support calls or your support costs, that goal doesn't necessarily benefit the power users. Instead, they want to hear about enhanced training, special offers, and unique advantages. Somewhere in the middle of that, you should explain that you hope others in their organization will come to them when they have questions and that they will be able to answer their questions.
It's a good idea to establish these goals -- or similar goals for your group:

Be the central point of knowledge about SharePoint solutions in the organization

- Be a forum where everyone can share the solutions they've created with the others
- Be a support network for each other and for users within the organization

Step 3: Develop a schedule and rough agenda for the meetings

At some point, you're going to have to pick a time to meet on a regular basis and how you're going to conduct the meetings. It's generally best to start with once a month and from there decide whether it's too frequent or not frequent enough. Based on the velocity of SharePoint growth in your organization it might be appropriate to meet every other week. In other organizations once a quarter might be enough.

In terms of a time of day, I recommend lunch time. If the IT budget can support buying a few meals, it's generally much cheaper than support alternatives and it promotes good will. If that's not possible, at least create a way for folks to bring in or get their own food and continue to contribute. Some organizations even make these pitch-in lunches which further fosters the community that is important to the group's success.

Next, you need to come up with a rough agenda. This is particularly important so everyone knows there will be an opportunity to discuss their problems and seek the help and advice from others. You'll also want to reserve time to talk about new solutions that have been created, new tricks that have been learned, or other opportunities to share knowledge.

The rest of the agenda should be targeted at education of the power users, evaluation of techniques to further educate others in the organization, or potential third-party tools that may make the SharePoint environment better.

Step 4: Execute

Execution is the biggest challenge to making this project successful. Everyone is busy, so finding the time to prepare for the meetings is hard. It's likely that the initiative will work fairly well for a meeting or two and then, if you aren't careful, it will start to fall apart. That's why you need to prioritize it in your day. These groups have the potential to be a great advantage -- but only if you keep them entertaining, relevant, and meaningful to the participants. That means preparation.

If you know that you're going to weak in this area, ask one of the powers users to be an assistant. Generally, you'll find one or two people who are willing to help coordinate agendas and facilitate the meeting on occasion.

It cannot be overstated that execution is the number one key to a successful group. Even if you can't do it, it's critical that you find someone, or several someones who can.

Step 5: Refine

No plan is perfect the first time out of the gate. It takes constant change and refinement to create a truly powerful group. That means looking for better ways to educate, better ways to support, and ultimately reevaluating how the group is meeting its objective.

Specific tips for conversations

Your group will develop its own style for conversation and dwell on topics that are of particular interest to the folks in your organization. However, there are some topics and approaches that you may want to consider for your conversations:

- Hopes -- Sharing your hopes for the group, in other words your vision, can be very powerful to rally a group around a set of ideals that may or may not be achievable.
- Fears -- It's normal for there to be fears about the kinds of support problems that will be created with any new system. Part of that fear is that you'll not be able to adequately support the users in your organization the right way. This is a great fear to discuss with the group because it will enable everyone to make sure they're focused on taking care of the users who need support.
- Big picture -- Each member of the group will see SharePoint from their perspective. Their part of the organization will focus on their specific uses and needs. In organizations of every size it's important to ensure that the power users don't forget the overall objectives of SharePoint in the organization so that they can stay aligned.
- Training on basic administration -- It may seem obvious to the IT administrator but it isn't so obvious to everyone that, for example, assigning permissions to groups instead of assigning permissions to individual users is more manageable. Providing support to the power users to help them understand some of the dynamics of managing permissions will pay off in their time and in yours.

Good luck on gaining the committed support of your power users!

About the Author

Robert Bogue, MCSE (NT4/W2K), MCSA:Security, A+, Network+, Server+, I-Net+, IT Project+, E-Biz+, CDIA+ is the president of Thor Projects LLC. He has contributed to more than 100 book projects and numerous other publishing projects. He was recently honored to become a Microsoft MVP for Microsoft Office SharePoint Server. Before that Robert was a Microsoft Commerce Server MVP and before that Microsoft Windows Servers-Networking MVP. Robert blogs at http://www.thorprojects.com/blog. You can reach Robert at Rob.Bogue@thorprojects.com.