

Simplify The Operating Processes (STOP)

Patricia Marett

Vanderbilt University

ABSTRACT:

An extremely complex and diverse organization, Vanderbilt University created a taskforce to Simplify the Operating Processes (STOP.) The taskforce solicits suggestions from faculty and staff on how to streamline work. Comprised of faculty and staff across the campus and medical center, the taskforce has successfully completed several projects. The two project below share similar goals and strategy and serve as good examples of the STOP taskforce's ability to simplify processes.

THE FORMS LOCATOR

You cannot conduct business without forms of all varieties – paper forms, on-line forms, multi-part forms, etc., which in the past had to be obtained from the source responsible for the activity. An on-line FORMS LOCATOR was created that allows faculty, staff, and students to search for forms by form name or responsible department, and all in one location. The site provides the forms generally in Word, Excel, or Adobe format, or links directly to department web sites for on-line forms. Many forms feature additional information and detailed instructions on how they should be completed. Each department that offers forms is still responsible to maintain their forms or their own department web site. The FORMS LOCATOR simply provides a way to bring everything together in one easy to find on-line location. The service saves time and money and has been widely accepted by the university community.

THE TRAINING LOCATOR

Vanderbilt, like many institutions, has several departments that offer a wide variety of mandatory, professional, or personal development training. The hard task is to track down the class you need and find the department offering it. In response to this need a TRAINING LOCATOR was developed to assist faculty and staff in finding training opportunities. This way, whether looking for a self-defense course offered by Police and Security, a leadership course offered by Human Resource Services, or an OSHA regulation course offered by Environmental Health & Safety, all can be found in one location. The LOCATOR is searchable by course name, by the name of the offering department, by type of training, by key word, or by courses that offer CEU's. Departments can include a direct link so participants can register immediately and even provide a map to the class location. Course offerings include class room instruction, educational events, on-line, and self-study classes. For departments who offer courses but do not have web sites, the locator will help them upload their brochure or registration information directly from their own PC and it will be 'hosted' by the LOCATOR site. The TRAINING LOCATOR has become the "yellow pages" of training for the institution.

Both these tools help make all university units more effective. They are unique in that they combine information into one place without shifting "ownership" to a central source.

Introduction of the Organization

Vanderbilt University, founded in 1873, comprises 10 schools, a public policy institute, a distinguished medical center and The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center. A comprehensive research university in Nashville, Tennessee, Vanderbilt provides innovative programs, state-of-the-art facilities and a supporting environment for interdisciplinary inquiry for its more than 6,200 undergraduate and 4,000 graduate students. The campus, which comprises 326 acres, was designated a national arboretum in 1988.

Vanderbilt is the largest private employer in Middle Tennessee, and the second largest in the state, employing over 16,000 faculty and staff. With an operating budget of \$1.8 billion dollars, Vanderbilt works diligently to carry out its mission of excellence in research, teaching, and patient care. In addition to its strong undergraduate program, the Law School, the Divinity School, Owen Graduate School of Management, Peabody College, the School of Engineering, the Nursing School, and the Medical School share the campus providing a perfect atmosphere for collaboration across disciplines.

The STOP Initiative:

The STOP taskforce solicits suggestions from across the institution on ways to streamline the bureaucracy, cut the red tape, or as we chose to call it – Simplify The Operating Processes. The taskforce was charged by the Chancellor and consists of 12 faculty and staff who meet monthly to prioritize suggestions, determine their feasibility, and set up working groups to implement the ideas selected as projects.

Rather than large technologically complex ideas such as “put all work flow on-line,” the taskforce specializes in “quick wins.” These projects generally burble up from the front lines. Some are as simple as deleting the number of signature required on forms. Others, such as revamping the orientation process, cross many institutional boundaries and require some level of diplomacy to create the necessary buy-in from all parties.

Examples of some completed stop projects include: simplifying the process to reclassify positions, simplifying travel expense reporting, simplify the hiring process for research assistants, creation of a listserv to remind faculty and staff when requests are due for payment of dependent tuition, and simplifying the process to obtain salary quotes for new employees.

The two STOP projects that are being submitted for consideration as best practices share a common goal of gathering information from around the campus and medical center into an on-line web tool, easily accessible to all. The first project came from a complaint STOP received from an administrative assistant stating that many forms were hard to find and it was difficult to determine who to call for which. The second project was the result

of an inquiry by a faculty member that they had heard of a good self-defense training class on campus but that when they called Human Resource Services no one knew who offered the training. The taskforce determined that the simple solution to these challenges was to create an on-line LOCATOR for each. This was the beginning of FORMS LOCATOR and TRAINING LOCATOR.

FORMS LOCATOR

Design:

Once the STOP taskforce decided that a FORMS LOCATOR met the criteria for a STOP project, a small subset of the group met to brainstorm ideas to bring the project to life. At Vanderbilt there are many genres of forms: paper, electronic, multi-part, and numbered. They are “owned” by a variety of departments such as Accounting, Contracts & Grants, Financial Management, Risk Management, Procurement & Disbursements, and Human Resource Services.

It was not feasible that all these forms be maintained, updated, and produced by any one of these departments. However, it was feasible that a web site be created which would contain links to each form. This way the maintenance of the form remained with the responsible department. The task for STOP was to locate all the forms, link to those that were electronic, provide a mechanism to make forms that were paper based electronic, and educate form owners and users.

To create the web site STOP hired a freshman engineering student with prior experience in interactive web design. Under the direction of the STOP subgroup, he created a site that was searchable by name of form or department responsible for the form. Forms can be added in Word, Excel, or PDF format and many departments have added documents that provide instructions on completing their forms.

If a department does not have their own web site that the forms locator can link to, the application allows them to upload the form from their computer and it is hosted on the forms locator web site. When departments make changes to their forms on their department web sites, as long as they do not change the web address, the link to the forms locator remains current. Once a department representative has a password to the forms locator they can add, update, delete, add instructions to, and put effective dates on forms via a simple, user-friendly on-line forms administration site.

Implementation:

Once the prototype was developed the STOP subgroup populated it with as many forms as they could find from a wide variety of departments. Representatives of these departments were then invited to a focus group where we demonstrated the application. Seeing that making their forms more accessible would increase their department's efficiency, they all became invested in the concept and populated the application with their remaining forms.

Once completed the application was announced at the Vanderbilt Business Administrator's Forum. In addition, e-mails were sent to all administrators with a brief description of the application and the web location. Articles were released in various Vanderbilt publications highlighting this STOP innovation.

The program took approximately 65 hours of development time, for which we paid the engineering student \$4,300. The application does not require much maintenance except for providing passwords to departments to allow them to upload forms or change form locations. STOP has found that when forms do not link correctly or expired forms are on the site, form users begin calling the department responsible for the forms until the issue is corrected. This greatly simplifies the central maintenance required by STOP.

Retrospective:

The only remaining roadblock to having all forms in one place is determining the best way to deal with pre-numbered forms. In the case of travel authorizations, the determination was made that the authorization number should be the initials of the traveler followed by the beginning date of the travel. This allowed the form to be available in forms locator without having to be pre-numbered. The taskforce is still considering a way to handle other pre-numbered forms such as demand check requests.

Overall, this application was easy to accomplish and has been successful in saving time and allowing the business managers to be more efficient in their work. To view the FORMS LOCATOR go to <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/stop/forms>.

TRAINING LOCATOR

Design:

When the suggestion was received to make it easier to locate available training classes it was obvious to the STOP taskforce that this could be accomplished by mirroring the type of on-line web application developed for the FORMS LOCATOR. A sub-group of STOP began gathering information on current training and professional development offerings at Vanderbilt. Some departments listed their classes on their web sites; some periodically sent out flyers by campus mail. The list was long and varied. The Police department offered self-defense training, Environmental Health & Safety offered training in the use of radiation, The Learning Center offered CPR Renewal, Human Resource Services Training offered leadership courses, Opportunity Development offered classes on diversity, etc. There was no lack of courses, only the need to systematically gather the information about them into one place.

The STOP taskforce hired the same engineering student who developed the FORMS LOCATOR to develop the TRAINING LOCATOR. It was easy to develop since it greatly mirrored the prior application. Classes are searchable by course name, name of sponsoring department, key word, courses that offer continuing education credit, mandatory courses, and by type of training (e.g. finance, management, safety, technology, medical center). For those departments who have web sites that list their course offerings, the LOCATOR simply links to their site. Departments who do not have a website can upload information to be hosted by the training locator site.

Implementation:

All departments offering training were invited to attend one of three, hands-on demo sessions once the application was ready. They kicked the tires and offered their suggestions on how to improve the product.

Seeing that having this information available centrally would greatly increase the visibility of their offerings was an excellent incentive for them to list all of their courses on the site. Department administrators are provided passwords to the TRAINING LOCATOR administration web site. There they may put in information on their courses including title, key word description, and can mark courses as NEW or add dates that the course should be taken off the course listing. They also add the type of course and can list if the course provides any continuing education credit or is mandatory. Since the site is searchable by key word, the course description should be chocked-full of key words that might be used by someone to search to find the course. In addition, from the administration site departments can add links to on-line registration or even include maps of how to find the course location.

The application has been well received and has improved the marketing for all training and professional development courses as well as made finding needed training more efficient. The site took about 35 hours to design for which the engineering student received approximately \$2,300. To view the TRAINING LOCATOR go to <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/stop/training>.