

eSTART: Electronic Staff Reference Tool

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Abstract

*The University Business Administrators (UBA) Program at Florida State University realized that through growth and expansion of our organization that maintaining effective training and procedure manuals had not kept up with the demands of our ever-increasing responsibilities. Originally, the program had fewer than ten employees in four locations and management was able to provide hands-on instruction and guidance for all employees on limited tasks. Over the past eight years, the program has increased to 120+ employees in 31 campus locations with responsibilities in financial, budgetary, human resources and administrative areas. The management team determined that to better position ourselves for short-term vacancies, turnover in staff, training new employees and peak workload demands, it would be crucial to develop a plan to identify job functions by position and consistently document the information for every responsible task. We selected the title “eSTART” which is our **Electronic Staff Reference Tool** to indicate this would be more than an employee procedures manual, but rather a broader and more dynamic tool for employees and their supervisors.*

The project required the support of the entire UBA executive management team and was facilitated by Johnoson Crutchfield Sr., UBA Assistant Director. The project coordinator was also assisted by a graduate student for much of the research and data entry formatting. The process began with the creation of a functional (job task) survey that was sent to each employee and their supervisor. The survey covered as many job tasks and functions that were noted on all of the position description and any additional recurring special projects/assignments unique and site specific. The survey provided a mechanism to gather the information and summarize the core functions very quickly. An electronic training and staff reference tool template was designed and given to the employees to complete with their supervisor. Focus groups and “one-on-one help sessions” were provided to pool the information and assist with the writing aspect of the project. The template was designed to link core functions by position to the Finance and Administration Policies and Procedures via Uniform Resource Locators (URL’s) on the university website. Connecting the day-to-day operational functions to university policy was a major component of this project.

To provide internet accessibility, the approved eSTART documents were stored on a Blackboard platform supported by the university Office of Technology Integration. Blackboard™ provides the university community a secure environment for teaching and learning, participating in sponsored organizations, and using Secure Applications to transact University business. All of the positions within our program now have fully documented training and staff reference tools located on the Blackboard site. The documents are stored on the site and are internet accessible which increases the ability to share information with others in our organization. This also provides a mechanism to easily update the document due to the demands and changes in processes, staffing, and technology.

We have found this project to be extremely valuable when we experienced vacancies or unexpected staff absences during the past year. We have had comments by the newly hired staff that they have never felt as comfortable beginning a new position as they have with their current position. They noted that their feeling of early success and productivity in their new position was because of the training and support given by the UBA executive team and the importance placed on documenting processes and procedures.

Introduction of the Organization

The Florida State University, one of the largest and oldest of the eleven institutions of higher learning in the State University System of Florida, had its beginning as early as 1823 when the Territorial Legislature began to plan a higher education system. In each succeeding decade, Florida State University has added to its academic organization and presently is comprised of seventeen independent schools and colleges. It has expanded from the original few acres and buildings to 513 buildings on 1,432.2 acres, including the downtown Tallahassee main campus of 463.4 acres, a farm which for many decades supplied the Florida State College for Women with food, the Seminole Reservation—a recreational facility, the Marine Laboratory on the Gulf Coast, the FAMU/FSU College of Engineering facility, the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory and Division of Research at Innovation Park, and the branch campus in Panama City, Florida. Florida State University has gained recognition as a major graduate research institution with an established international reputation and has an operating budget of over \$1 billion dollars.

Florida State University is a comprehensive degree granting university, offering baccalaureate degrees in 94 programs, master's degrees in 107 programs, advanced master's/specialist degrees in 28 programs, doctorates in 73 programs and two professional degrees. The university offers fully accredited programs in both law (J.D.) and medicine (M.D.).

Degree programs at branch campuses in Panama City, Sarasota and the Republic of Panama are also available. The Ringling Museum in Sarasota, affiliated with Florida State University, is the largest museum/university complex in the U.S. and houses one of the most significant collections of fine art in North America.

In addition to the branch campuses, the university offers a variety of overseas study opportunities for students during the regular academic year, as well as in special summer

programs. Florida State University study centers are located in Florence, Italy; Panama City, Republic of Panama; Valencia, Spain; and London, England.

During the Fall 2008 semester, Florida State University had 51 National Merit Scholars, 8 National Achievement Scholars, and 13 Hispanic Scholars enrolled at Florida State University. The middle 50 percent SAT score for freshmen entering in Fall 2008 is 1150-1300.

With a total of 39,136 students enrolled in Fall 2008, the student body is comprised of 75.7% undergraduate, 21.4% graduate and 2.9% unclassified. Women account for 55.7% of the enrollment, and minorities comprise 25.3% of total enrollment. Students from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, as well as dozens of countries, are represented.

The Division of Finance and Administration originally established the Academic Business Administrators (ABA) Program in 1984 which only provided service to four academic units. In 1991, under the guidance of John R. Carnaghi, Sr. Vice President for Finance and Administration, the program began to expand and offered services on a larger scale. By 2004, the ABA Program had steadily grown and included client sites from the academic, auxiliary and administrative areas on campus. The Academic Business Administrators became the University Business Administrators (UBA) to reflect the expansion to all campus units.

The mission of the UBA Program is to provide exemplary professional staff and custom-designed services to participating university units. It is our vision to facilitate and assist academic, auxiliary, and administrative units in accomplishing their objectives by maximizing the performance of University business, human resources and administrative procedures. The UBA Program continues to grow and now has over 120 positions in 31 units across campus participating in the partnership.

Statement of the Problem/Initiative

The University Business Administrators Program recognized the need to capture information for the job functions that each of the 120+ employees were providing to their client sites. Through our research regarding existing procedure manuals and position descriptions we discovered that many employees were completing additional tasks not specifically noted on their official job description, nor were there detailed and current procedures for these tasks. This became a very noticeable concern when one of our key on-site supervisors resigned and their supervisor, who managed multiple areas in another location, had to step in and fill the void until a replacement was hired and fully trained. In addition, within a short period of time another employee within this section accepted a promotional opportunity in another department on campus leaving the area severely understaffed.

The expectation of this particular Dean at our client site was that all functions and responsibilities would be handled by the UBA Assistant Director (supervisor) of this position. Within the first day or so the supervisor realized that non-routine tasks and assignments that had been previously handled by these positions were being requested, but with no records or instructions on how to complete them. To compensate for this loss in historical knowledge and operational experience, the supervisor began to document all the processes and activities for each position. It was fortunate that the supervisor had a wide range of contacts within the university community and utilized their resources to complete the assignments of this position.

During this vacancy period, the supervisor discussed with his peers the value of having current documentation and reference tools to assist with short term vacancies or the development of new staff. Many of the supervisors manage staff in multiple locations with a

variety of standardized and non-standardized (site specific) duties and responsibilities. It was paramount that we effectively document procedures for each task and assignment that we were ultimately responsible for to ensure we could provide the service and back-up for these roles on a consistent and effective basis.

Design

Recognizing the need for a systematic and efficient way to document and maintain employee training and procedure information was the first step in beginning this project. The UBA executive management team met to brainstorm ideas on going about this monumental project. We realized that often training or procedure manuals are often considered difficult to write and are usually completed by technical experts and in a method that is not easily understood. We also realized that unless the document was constantly evolving and updated that it would quickly lose its impact and usefulness. It was decided that we would focus on several key elements:

1. Communicate the value of the project and gain buy-in from all stakeholders, most importantly the employees
2. Establish an electronic method to gather the base information
3. Collaborate and provide assistance during the process
4. Establish a sustainable platform to maintain and update the documents on a continuous basis

At the end of the first meeting we selected a project coordinator, Johnson Crutchfield, Sr. to take the lead in facilitating the endeavor. To assist in the project, a graduate assistant would provide research and administrative support as well as the cooperation of all the UBA executive team members and all staff members.

The first step was the revision of the list of services provided by the UBA Program. We further detailed the services in an Excel spreadsheet to include specific job functions and responsibilities of each core area associated with finance & administrative type functions. After finalizing the spreadsheet we provided a copy to all employees and asked them to complete the list of services survey and denote which functions they were the primary responsible party and which functions they provided back-up to another employee. As the surveys were returned the data was captured and summarized in the Excel worksheet and grouped in order by client site.

The next step was to create a template for standardizing the format in which the information would be stored. After researching other designs and layouts, the management team finalized the template for use in this project. The following Table of Contents provides a summary of the information requested to complete the resource tool.

Table of Contents Example

UBA Vision	
UBA Values.....	
Excellence.....	
Professionalism.....	
Superior Customer Service	
Optimal Organizational and Employee Performance	
UBA Strategic Initiatives.....	
UBA Organizational Chart	
UBA Employee Training Plan Chart.....	
UBA (site specific) Overview	
Resources Required.....	
Department Designated/UBA Staff (as of November 2008)	
UBA Assistant Director Position Overview	
Department (site specific) P-Card Overview.....	
Purchasing Requests /Approvals	
Department (site specific) Travel Overview.....	
Property	
Ledger Reconciliation	
Budget	
Budget Transfers.....	
Annual Budget Request/Budget Planning & Forecast.....	
Budgets- Inclusive Department IDs.....	
Foundation Accounts.....	
Salary and Appointments	
Collections.....	
Annual Auxiliary Report	
Time and Leave	
Department (site specific) Reports Overview.....	
Department (site specific) Monthly Report:	
Required Reports	
Description of Report Preparation Process	
Meetings Attended	
Special Events Required to Attend/Assist With	
(example: Florida Government Technology Conference (FGTC))	
Training Responsibilities.....	
Positions Supervised.....	
Positions Supervised.....	
#XXXXXX (employee name)	
#XXXXXX (employee name)	
#XXXXXX (employee name)	
Other Duties	
Reviewing Department (site specific) Contracts	
(example: Review hotel contracts for Centers at FSU).....	
Other Site Specific Information.....	
Department (site specific) Cash Handling	
Department (site specific) Methods of Payment.....	
Department (site specific) Cash for Testing Center.....	
Department (site specific) Software System.....	
Department (site specific) OMNI Financial Chartfield List	
Department (site specific) Residuals	
Acronyms/Terminology	
Florida State University Acronyms and Terminology	
UBA Specific Acronyms and Terminology.....	
Site Specific Acronyms and Terminology.....	

In general, each Table of Contents provided the general guideline and then was followed by a list of guiding questions in the same order that prompted the employee to write specific information as it related to their role and job functions within their unit. It also allowed employees to add specific or unique attributes regarding their culture, environment and events not otherwise documented that affected their position.

In content areas where the information was universal among all positions (i.e. organizational overview, vision, mission, etc.) a standardized written response was pre-loaded in the appropriate area. Other useful tips and samples were provided to assist in the development of the location specific content information and expedite the process.

In a final development meeting it was also agreed upon by the UBA Executive Management team that each document would be reviewed and discussed by the employee and their supervisor on a semi-annual basis. The review process would become a specific goal added to the performance evaluation of each employee and monitored within the UBA Central Office. Due to the investment of time and effort by the entire organization and the value placed upon this project we wanted to ensure that the information remained current and relevant. A commitment was made by all levels within the organization to use the information as a resource tool to better serve our client sites and reduce loss of institutional knowledge when vacancies occur.

Implementation

Each of the UBA Assistant Directors attended several workshops and meetings facilitated by the project coordinator to fully understand the level of detail and information required by their employees. Slight revisions were made to the process as

feedback was given and the project developed. Having a baseline understanding and support at the management level was invaluable at this point in the project.

During an organizational wide staff meeting the project was officially “unveiled” and an overview of how to complete the first draft was presented to the staff. Those who were not in attendance received this information directly from their supervisor and through several e-mails from the project coordinator. Each employee was then sent an electronic copy of the template and given two months to complete their first submission. We realized that this would be a daunting task for some of our staff to actually write down the procedures and explain their various functions and unique location specific processes; therefore, to keep pace and meet timelines, patience was exercised and assistance was offered through the UBA Central Office personnel. We provided regular focus group meetings with designated team leaders to facilitate the sharing of resources and knowledge based upon the common functional areas (i.e. purchasing, accounts payable, travel, budgets, etc.) noted in the original survey.

During the documentation portion of the project, we encouraged group collaboration and the sharing of well written procedures and background information among the group to help staff members who were struggling with the writing aspect of this project. The graduate student also assisted with reviewing and streamlining the submissions throughout the entire process and made frequent contact with the staff to ensure certain deadlines were being met. To encourage participation and energize the staff to complete the assignment by the designated deadlines, regular incentives and rewards were given to the staff by the executive management team.

To ensure that the information provided was in a complete format, the project coordinator, graduate assistant and several other key supervisors read through the submissions and made changes or asked for additional information as appropriate. This

included: editing for grammatical errors, verifying that all of the hyper-links to university policy & procedures were valid and were working, and reviewing the content of the operational procedures for accuracy. The final step was adding the documents on the Blackboard site. Each UBA site was given an individual “folder” to store their documents by individual position and inserting security measures to restrict the editing access to a limited number of supervisors.

Benefits

Our organization has benefited tremendously from each position having an electronic staff reference tool (eSTART). As soon as a supervisor hires a new employee, often prior to their first day, we are able to provide them with the materials. Not only does this reduce the frustration and stress of the first day, but it enables them to feel more self sufficient, and more in control. They are able to hit the ground running and immediately make an impact to the client site which they are assigned.

Supervisors feel more confident when an employee resigns or retires that they will be able to continue to handle the critical job functions that the employee performed. We have all had that sinking feeling in our stomach when a key employee comes into our office and informs us that they are resigning from their position. Especially, if this employee has been there for many years and much of the documentation of their daily tasks is “in their head.”

We are now able to use eSTART as a training tool for new employees to augment one-on-one training, as well as classroom training provided by the UBA Central Office. Although it is difficult to measure, employees are able to become proficient in their position at a faster pace when all the information that they need concerning their position is in one location. Much of the University’s policies and procedures are on the web, however, this

new employee reference tools provide links to all of the items that are pertinent to the employee's position. The employee does not have to spend time searching the web to find information, as eSTART has already classified and organized pertinent materials.

In addition, when our employees know what is expected of them, where to find what they need, how things are done, and the standard office procedures, everyone benefits.

eSTART enables us to provide better service to our client site because we have anticipated this development need with new staff or those providing back-up support. When we have employee turnover at a client site, our goal is to not miss a beat and continue to provide superior customer service. Our client sites appreciate this effort and are relieved to know that the critical functions will still be accomplished even with vacancies, unexpected staff absences, and unexpected peak work load demands.

Retrospect

In retrospect, the primary thing that we would have done differently would have been to implement our eSTART project sooner. This electronic reference tool has been a huge benefit to our organization in terms of providing a tool to effectively manage the positions within our organization. Additionally, we realized it was a great disservice to our new employees to not provide a roadmap for them to follow in regards to the expectation of the supervisor, customers and others in which they would interact.

The impact of not having the resource tools in place earlier has resulted in loss of productivity during the first weeks of employment by new employees and during extended employee absences at our client sites. While we were still able to provide services to our client sites, the lack of documented procedures impacted how effectively we were able to deliver those services.

Focus groups to meet with employees prior to the preparation of the eSTART documents could have prevented some of apprehension from the employees about the project. There was a feeling on the part of some employees that if we knew everything that they knew about accomplishing their responsibilities, they would not be necessary anymore. The focus groups could have alleviated some of those feelings and obtained more “buy in” from the employees, prior to the beginning of the project. Also, we could have obtained more support from employees, especially supervisors, had we stressed the benefit to the employees, rather than just a benefit to management.

As with any new project, we learned to be flexible and seek input from all levels within the organization. By prioritizing the importance of building a resource tool through a collaborative effort with staff we are now in a better position to handle staffing changes and non-routine responsibilities within all areas of our organization. We will continue to improve on our eSTART project by continuously reviewing and monitoring its effectiveness.