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Student Workers Replace Retiring IT Staff in Los Angeles.

As the City of Angels prepares to lose 60 percent of its IT staff within the next five years, management looks for new ways to fill the gap.

Being in a compromised position can sometimes lead to new ideas — something Los Angeles and many other cities know much about given their budget constraints and challenges of a new economy. And retiring IT staff is another such challenge, but the City of Angels has figured out a way to handle the problem — at least for now. Los Angeles is using student workers as a temporary solution to its IT help desk staffing issues, said Steve Reneker, general manager for the city's Information Technology Agency.

About 60 percent of the city's IT staff will reach retirement age within the next five years, Reneker said, and four of the seven full-time workers at the help services desk have already retired (a fifth will be hired the week of May 19). Ideally, the city would replace the staff with new full-time employees because, as Reneker noted, hiring student workers has a few disadvantages — like the fact that they can't work more than 24 hours per week, [among others](#).

Because money is tight, however — and because hiring full-time employees has some drawbacks of its own, such as being time consuming and expensive, and allocating funds for those positions is something Reneker's office no longer has the authority to do — the city hired student workers and determined how to work around the obstacles.

Another thing that made the hiring of student workers a bit simpler is that some already were on staff to help the city switch operating systems from Windows XP to Windows 7. And because Los Angeles didn't want a lapse in service for IT phone support, the fastest way to fill those vacant positions was to hire in-house, Reneker said, so they moved four of those student workers to new positions at the help desk — one of which is being transferred to provide technical field support for the City Attorneys Office the week the fifth full-time staffer comes on board, according to the staff at the Technology Service Center.

The help desk position are imperative. The Technology Service Center provides first-level support to 4,500 of the 30,000 city users, which are primarily elected offices and small departments without systems support, according to the center. And from May of 2013 to April of 2014, the TSC managed 22,000 service tickets.

Though the hiring of student workers wasn't initially a huge benefit over hiring full-time staffers, Reneker said the solution ultimately turned out "really well" for the city. The retired help desk staff were very specialized — they could help with some software and basic hardware issues over the phone, he said, but they didn't have the skills to handle field work. This new generation of students and student workers, however, has a bigger skill set, he said, which allows the city to be more flexible.

"We're able to rotate those on the help desk into the field so we don't burn them out," he said. "Because they're [student workers], the turnover is going to be relatively high, so it's important that

we have a good backfill strategy for being able to deal with those resources.”

For up to the next 36 months, the city’s strategy will be to use its student workers in both call center and field work positions, Reneker said. And while having employees who can fill that diverse range is a benefit, there are a couple of big disadvantages as well.

“You probably have a total cost that’s somewhat less, but you lose the institutional knowledge of people who understand how things work in the city, who the critical points of contact are, and legacy systems knowledge and things like that, so having that type of turnover doesn’t necessarily mean you’re getting a consistent level of service,” he said. “We’re definitely answering the phones, but what we’re seeing is there’s a decline in our ability to be able to resolve those calls on the first call before we transfer it or capture the ticket. It’s a Band-Aid. It’s not a long-term strategy we think is prudent for others to consider.”

Having student workers on staff with larger skill sets led to the realization that there’s value in hiring people who have the flexibility to do multiple jobs, Reneker said, and the city plans to continue rotating its staff between the field and call center when the funds become available to fill those positions with full-time workers.

This story was updated at 2:40 p.m. on May 14 to reflect information obtained from the Los Angeles ITA’s Technology Service Center.

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