

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IS A “JOB TO BE DONE” WITH THE CUSTOMER AT THE CENTER

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For many years, administrators of higher education institutions have been struggling with how to consolidate and standardize their processes in functions such as finance, supply chain, human resources, research administration, student affairs and information technology to deliver services more efficiently and effectively to their business units.

“What can we uniquely do for the customer of the service?”

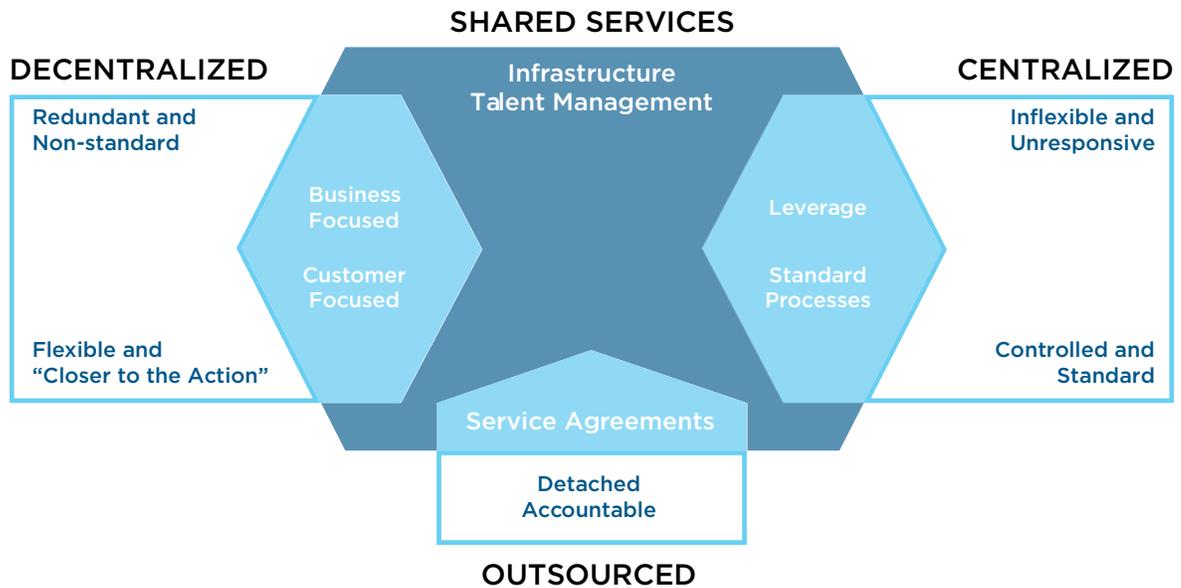
The Benefits of a Shared-Services Model

This is a topic often rife with emotion because, in general, developing administrative or operational processes for any business is burdened with parameters — regulatory requirements, efficiency pressures, service level requirements, existing policy and program compliance — yet requires an institution to address each business unit’s unique attributes, culture and strategic and operational priorities. Capturing all these parameters and requirements is critically important to any solution design but exceedingly difficult to achieve.

Delivering administrative services through a shared services model leverages resources across the organization, standardizes processes and aligns technology. Well designed and implemented, the model can result in lower costs, higher employee satisfaction and greater customer service. Since the mid-1990s, organizations, in a variety of industries, have proven that the shared services organizational model is both possible and capable of delivering significant financial and operational benefit.

Organizations that have been able to implement these operating models now focus their energy on optimization by continuing to reduce operational costs while maintaining or enhancing service levels. More recently, they have begun to focus their efforts on automation, through Robotic or Rapid Process Automation or Artificial Intelligence, to deliver services more efficiently and effectively.

The shift to more shared service-focused administrative functions can take many forms, from the traditional captive shared services center where certain activities and processes are delivered from a shared location centrally to a hub and spoke structure, outsourcing and any combination in between. Each form has elements to support its adoption for particular functions, business needs and culture. Generally, shared services allows an organization to leverage the best qualities of each model as depicted in the following graphic:



A Change in Perspective

For too long, when deciding how to architect their administrative services support business model administrators have viewed the administrative support business model as an organizational model: How are we going to be structured to deliver the service? Rather, administrators should be asking, “What can we uniquely do for the customer of the service?” Answering this question requires the institution to focus on the user, not an organizational model. The result is a “customer-centered design.”

Designing a model with the customer at the center should start with a review of the job to be done. At its core, the jobs to be done concept is simple: people don’t buy products or services; rather, they hire them to get jobs done in their lives. As such, to determine the job on which to base a change in the administrative support functions, leaders need to understand the fundamental problems facing the users of that service, as well as the progress they’re seeking to make in overcoming the problem they are solving for. Although users of administrative services often struggle to describe what they want, they can be direct in explaining what they are trying to accomplish.

For example, if you take the Dean seat, the job to be done can be keeping faculty engaged and productive. In many cases, this means that he or she must build or fund support services, such as Information Technology, so that both small and complex issues get resolved quickly. Someone must be available and competent to solve a range of problems.

A customer center-led Information Technology services initiative that only focuses on cost reduction or efficiency could succumb to a few gaps:

1. Faculty don’t have access to the full range of services that they need;
2. Faculty have access to services, but they spend time navigating those services (which eats into productivity); or
3. Faculty can find the service catalog that they need, but don’t receive the level of service they expect or are accustomed to receiving in the past.

For the Dean, the solution needs to reliably address his or her job to be done concerns. The initiative cannot be executed based on concepts or frameworks without an actual appreciation for the work of teaching and research – the solution designer, for example, must understand what it

is like working in a lab. This doesn't mean that services can't be defined or rationalized. But they need to start with a thoughtful understanding of what it means to be an academic researcher.

In the end, if the solution does the job well, the Dean will hire that same solution again. And if the solution does a poor job, the Dean will 'fire' the solution and look for something else he or she might hire to solve the problem such as building the function within the school or a department.

A customer-centered design essentially puts the customer at the center of the process. It frames solutions in relation to the job to be done or goal that the customer is trying to achieve. Importantly, customer-centered design doesn't mean complete customization or lack of impact on customer behavior. It requires all parties taking a step back to think about the goal and the solution, not just the mechanics of it.

Case in Point: Reengineering a Talent Acquisition Process

A customer-centered design fundamentally prompts three big questions:

1. **Who is the customer?** Most university processes involve both central and local participants and often cross functions. The hiring process, for example, can involve human resources, finance, division leadership and departmental administration. Each of these participants contributes value, whether it's expertise in job classification, stewardship of university funds or coordination of department resources. In the end, however, the hiring process is intended to serve the talent need for a particular hiring manager or faculty member. The impact of not addressing the need is experienced as lost time and productivity. In defining the customer, it's also important to consider different segments or types of customers. One segment may have vast experience with the process. They, perhaps, have a thorough understanding of the process and the participants and may often “facilitate” the process by filling in gaps. Another segment, which often includes faculty, may have urgent talent acquisition needs but less extensive experience with the process or business requirements. You, therefore, must address these customers' job to be done differently.
2. **What are we trying to do?** Talent acquisition involves several different component processes, such as creating a position, posting a position, sourcing candidates and hiring new employees. From a systems or process design perspective, each of these processes has its own requirements and controls. Nevertheless, the customers, as we have defined them in this example, are not focusing on the sub-processes. They are focused on the outcome. Establishing where one process starts and another stops is not important. Similarly, the fact that a process may involve different systems or tools is also not salient. Keeping the customer-centered design point of view in mind prompts the design team to review all processes to ensure that the links are well integrated. By the time a candidate is made an offer, for example, much of the data required to process the hire has already been collected. With a customer-centered design, the goal is to create a seamless experience focused on reducing duplication to move data forward.
3. **How do we navigate the solution?** Understanding how to access the right services or solutions easily and intuitively is critical for customer-centered designs. For example, a smartphone application demonstrates the ability to locate, access and track complex services with no training or documentation. Navigation focuses on the customer perspective, customer language related to the process and getting the job done efficiently and effectively. Strong navigation in the new hire process can enable a faculty member to request support without concern over filling out the wrong form. On the back end, mechanisms

to control data, mechanisms to control approvals and mechanisms to correct errors prevent frustration over not doing something the right way. As another example, a faculty member may initiate hiring by going to a local HR resource, contacting central HR or entering a ticket into a case management system. Regardless of the point of entry, the integrated processes behind the scene should capture the need and get the “job” done.

Putting Jobs to Be Done into Practice

How different does a customer-centered approach look from your current approach? Requirements still need to be gathered and stakeholders engaged, but the shift should be captured as follows:

1. **Organize processes according to value, not technology.** Systems-focused projects, in particular, often organize efforts around particular modules or functional sub-teams. Establishing user needs as the organizing principle promotes cross-functional collaboration and prompts solutions teams to consider hand-offs from the customer’s perspective.
2. **Ask about needs, not frustrations.** Many projects engage customers by focusing on their perspectives on the current state about a process or function. Uncovering the specificity (and variety) of needs should be a greater priority.
3. **Bring the customer into design sessions (figuratively, then literally).** Process or systems design meetings should reference back to how value is created for customers and how they view each step of the process. At later stages, this may involve bringing actual customers into the conversation.
4. **Test new solutions with credible scenarios.** Process maps tend to illustrate linear, forward-moving sequences of work. Contingencies and coordination often disrupt this happy

path. Thinking through coordination and error resolution using real-life scenarios builds more integrated, customer-friendly processes.

Changing your institution’s perspective on how to structure its administrative support functions from an organizational model to a customer-centered design with a job to be done has the potential to create solutions that are more readily adopted, address customer needs and gain customer buy-in. In other words, solutions that will make your institution more effective and efficient.



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