

FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR TEAM'S PERFORMANCE: HOW TO DEAL WITH THE WEAKEST LINK

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International Network Solutions opened a new division to start Information Technology (IT) support and outsourcing services. Due to the nature of IT support service, the new division included three shifts: morning, afternoon, and night. The night shift started with a small number of employees, and hired more employees as their full contracts started. The problem started with the hiring of George Smith. He was continuously asking questions and never seem to remember the answers, but the management only emphasized, "Team members should help each other."

INTRODUCTION

"Argh! I can't help this guy anymore!" It was late fall in 2017. Martin Brown¹ was venting his frustration through a quick note to his coworker, William Lee. Martin and William were employed by International Network Solutions and were part of the Information Technology (IT) support team for a night shift. Martin continued, "This dude has no technical competency whatsoever for IT. How in the world can he still not understand how VPN² works! It is super simple, and even non-experts can work on that. I am not even sure how he got his job here!"

William answered, "George, again? I just ignored his message 5 minutes ago. Guess he chose to bother you this time. Is he asking you about the VPN connection, again? Didn't we go through this like more than a hundred times already? How come he doesn't remember what we explained to him over and over?"

Martin replied, "Eventually, I will have to work on this. Remember what Frank told us: 'Team members should help each other'? So frustrating!"

¹ All names of people and companies have been disguised.

² Please see Glossary for technical terms and jargon.

THE NEW TECHNICAL SUPPORT SERVICE DIVISION

International Network Solutions (INS) specialized in information technology services, and focused on services including IT consulting, technical and support services, and managed services. The company maintained operations on every continent. With the new division, INS negotiated two contracts with Dreamwide Entertainment Inc. (Dreamwide) and Industrial Pumps (IP). Dreamwide was a live show production company, which owned a number of traveling shows, live theatrical shows, and motor sports. IP was a global provider of upstream and midstream oil and gas production and equipment. INS provided full network support for both Dreamwide and IP, including deploying and maintaining servers, network connectivity, diagnostics and repair, software testing and deployment, computer and network security, and full desktop support.

New Technical Support Team's Overall Structure. Dreamwide's contract with INS was for full services during business hours, while IP's contract with INS was for 24 hour support for global branches all over the world. Employees worked in three shifts; morning, afternoon, and night to provide 24 hour/7 day/week coverage, including weekends and holidays. The day shift (morning and afternoon) had 18 to 20 employees working every day, and supported both IP and Dreamwide. On the other hand, night shift had three to five employees working every night, and supported only IP's global sites, including India, Australia, UK, and China. On rare occasions, the night shift supported Dreamwide when employees travelled abroad for business trips and had technical issues.

The new technical support team included Tier 1 and Tier 2 employees, system administrators, and network administrators. Tier 1 provided more general customer support. When Tier 1 could not resolve the issue, it escalated to Tier 2 employees. Network administrators were in charge of the network of a group of computers, while system administrators were in charge of the computer systems, that is, all the parts that make a computer function. Technical support tasks started from Tier 1 employees. For any calls or email requests, Tier 1 employees answered the message first. They opened and created tickets, then attempted the first step of troubleshooting. When Tier 1 employees could not solve the problem with first step troubleshooting, they assigned the ticket to the next appropriate tier: either Tier 2 or system or network administrators. At the end of the work day, reports showed the total number of tickets with resolved or unresolved cases. The reports included specific information on overall total incident numbers, and separate numbers for day and night shift Tier 1 employees. Tier 1 and Tier 2 employees were compensated at a set hourly rate, so the overall team performance would not add additional rewards to them. However, managers reviewed each employee's overall performance and provide individual review and feedback.

The new technical support team had six supervisors, one manager, and one director. Supervisors and managers worked five days a week, 8 hours a day, and most of them worked during the day shift. Some of the management team worked at the afternoon shift, but managers worked during the night shift.

TABLE 1.
Three Shift Structure Summary

| Shift | Time | Total number of employees | Service area |
|-------|--|---|--|
| Day | Morning: From 7 am to 4 pm, 8 hours | Tier 1: 18 Tier 2: 6 | Dreamwide: 8 am to 5 pm; mostly North America |
| | Afternoon: From 3 pm to 11 pm, 8 hours | System Administrator: 8 Network Administrator: 30-40 | IP: North America, England, Scotland, and France |
| | | | English only |
| Night | From 7 pm to 7 am, 12 hours (English) | Tier 1: 3 Tier 2: 2 System Administrator: on call Network Administrator: on call | Dreamwide: Rare occasions, for overseas business trips. |
| | From 7 pm to 4 am, 8 hours (Chinese) | | IP: India, Australia, and UK (English queue); China (Chinese queue) |

THE NIGHT SHIFT TEAM

Compared to the day shift, the night shift had less total call volume. Most service was focused on IP only because of its global branches. At the beginning of the new service division, there was a crossover period, where IP kept previous contractors, but slowly moved to INS’s new service. During the transition, the night shift team started with only two full time employees because there were only four calls per week from IP. Three months later, as INS took over all services for IP, three more employees were hired for the night shift, a total of five employees. The night shift team had three Tier 1, and two Tier 2 employees working at the office, and system administrator and network administrators were working as on call basis. Those five night shift team members were as follow:

English queue. English queue had three employees. First, Martin Brown (Tier 1) joined the company at the beginning of the new technical support division in 2013. Brown served in the U.S. Air Force for 12 years across many oversea bases. It was his first job after he earned Bachelor's degree in Information Engineering Technology and Information Communication Technology. He had CCNA certificate with over 10 years of experience in computer engineering. He was easygoing and laid back, but dependable and hardworking at his job. He was very sociable and tried to be a good team member, always volunteering to help others whenever it was needed. He would always share data or knowledge when other team members needed it.

Second, Donovan Murray (Tier 2) arrived shortly after Brown, but still near the beginning of the new division. Murray was in the army reserves and was the oldest of the group. He had a wide range of knowledge in IT, and a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology. He was pretty laid back, but made sure to get things done. He was not talkative and did not socialized much with others. However, he cooperated with the team and assisted other team members, keeping the team on track.

Third, George Smith (Tier 1) was the next employee and was hired as a full time employee after the crossover period when INS took the full service and needed more employees. Smith had an Associate degree in Network Administration and Support Information Technology, but did not have any IT related certificates. He would come to work on time and tried to have a good work ethics but he tended to be sloppy and inefficient. He was timid and nervous sometimes, and did not communicate well with others whether business or casual conversation. He would continually ask questions of other team members over every small step, but he obviously knew them as he could complete all these simple tasks on his own. .

Chinese queue. Two employees were hired for the Chinese queue. First, William Lee (Tier 2) was hired as a full time employee. He was born in China, but came over to the U.S. at an early age. He spoke both Mandarin and English fluently. He had a Bachelor's degree in IT, and had CCNA, Net+, A+ certificates and had several years of experience before coming to INS. He was fairly laid back and sociable person. For his work, he was very well organized and reliable person, and helpful to others. He would step out to help other team members, especially Tier 1 employees, so to keep the team on track. He would also find ways to increase coordination of the team.

Davis Chan (Tier 1) was a contract hire through a temporary agency. He was born in China and moved to the U.S. in his high school year. He was fluent in Mandarin and spoke good English. He was in his early 20's and the youngest of the team.

This night shift was his first real job. He was quiet, but friendly. He did not have much experience, but he was eager to learn and learned pretty well. He had A+, NET+ certificate, and was working on his Bachelor's degree.

During the night shift, Brown, Murray and Smith handled India, Australia, and the UK sites, while Lee and Chan handled the China sites. Compared to the initial crossover period, call volume had significantly increased so that each employee on the night shift had two to four calls per hour for English queue, and four to six calls per hour for Chinese queue.

Lee and Chan, the Chinese queue, covered all five weekday nights, 8 hours per day, but English queue covered all week including weekends. The English queue employees covered 12 hours over 4 days, so each employee was split for the work schedule (e.g., Brown would worked from Sunday night to Thursday morning, and Murray and Smith worked from Wednesday night to Sunday morning, etc.). On average, there were three to four employees working in the office during the weekdays, but only one or two employees worked during the weekends. Wednesday was the only day when all five team members worked in the office together. During the shift, all employees could take an hour lunch break, but had to make sure that the queue was not empty and that at least one person was covering calls.

Management and Leadership Style. The night shift had little direct interaction with management. At the beginning, Frank Sanchez, the immediate supervisor for the night shift, worked during the afternoon shift (from 3 pm to 11 pm). The night shift team all worked in the office together face to face, but they there was also flexibility to work the shift through telecommuting. For certain events (e.g., holidays, bad weather, etc.), employees were allowed to work from home. Also, with manager's approval, employees were allowed to work from out of country for a longer term. For example, Chan was allowed to visit China and worked from there for a month, and Murray was allowed to work remotely during his military training weekends.

Sanchez did not work directly with the night shift team much, especially after he moved to a morning shift to better cover for his manager, Jeff Myers. Sanchez was gone by the time any of the night shift team employees arrived at the office. Thus, once he moved to the morning shift, the night shift team had no supervisory coverage. Most weekdays, Brown worked the latest until the morning, so he would see Sanchez for a few minutes before going home. Brown shared issues for the night shift or anything else that required Sanchez's attention as needed. Usually, however, Brown would not see or talk to him. Sanchez mostly communicated through emails as he considered most of the night shift team were technically strong enough to work without management, and did not need to be told everything to do

every step of the way. Sanchez strongly encouraged the night shift team to help each other when any member needed help.

EMERGENCE OF THE WEAKEST LINK

Brown did not have much chance to work with Smith at the beginning, but he could observe him closely on Wednesdays. As the call volume increased, Brown realized something was weird about Smith.

“I remember when Smith first came to the office. It was about 5 months after I started and shortly after Lee started. He seemed to get startled when the phone would ring. We had not fully taken over support of IP, so if the phone rang, it was really rare. He stumbled with his ‘intro’, and seemed super nervous navigating our toolset.”

Brown thought maybe that was because of Smith’s personality. A few weeks later, the night shift team had an initial review from the manager, Myers. After the review, Smith looked even more nervous.

“We all had an initial review, where our manager (the supervisor’s boss) came in to give us an evaluation, go over good things we did, give points for improvement, and let us ask general questions. The manager spent what seemed a bit more time with Smith, and in the days following the evaluation, Smith seemed to be even more nervous and apprehensive about things.”

Brown thought that Smith just needed some help and assurance about the job. Or maybe Smith was timid and needed more guidance and reassurance about his performance, his skills and assumed Smith’s qualifications were as good as the rest of the team as he believed everyone went through the same hiring process. Brown decided to spend more time to help Smith.

“The main reason I thought this is, when I was hired, the interview was thorough. I figured all potential hires went through that process, and weaker IT had been weeded out. Also I used to get that way, so I thought he was just struggling. I sat him down, talked to him, and let him know that he should calm down, relax, take some notes, write down his ‘script’, make ‘cheat sheets’ to help him along and generally making him feel more comfortable in his work process. I was able to boost his confidence a bit and get him something to stand on.”

However, it did not take too long for Brown to realize something was really wrong. All new employees had questions, but in Smith’s case, they did not stop. Smith would ask questions to Brown, and when Brown was busy with clients, he would ask questions to anyone who was available at that moment. All of the night shift

team had to help Smith with thorough step by step answers. If a simple step was missing, Smith would make a mistake. Then, he would report that he followed Brown's (or Lee's, or Murray's) direction and they were to blame.

A few months later, Smith requested to switch his schedule covering weekends again. It was much easier shift because many global sites did not work during the weekends. However, when Murray had to take some nights off because of his military duty, Smith would cover the English queue by himself, and would not be able to handle those few calls by himself. Those tickets would be sitting in the queue, unresolved, until Brown came back to work for Sunday nights.

“... what he did not have was true computer skills. Through the course of the next 5 years, we would learn that fact.”

It became clear that he really did not know what he was doing. He asked the same questions again and again, and he did not seem willing to learn or become better at anything IT-related. Moreover, Smith made mistakes that caused his coworkers wonder about his cognitive abilities. Brown shared his frustration with some examples:

Frustration 1. *“One item we had to continually repeat to him was how a VPN works. We would have to tell him that the client had to be connected to the VPN before they could access network resources. AND, we would have to tell Smith once the client connected to the VPN. The red X would not automatically go away on network shares until the client tried to access the share. We had to tell him this again and again for 5 years.”*

Frustration 2. *“Smith would receive a ticket from someone's manager that would say that ‘one of their employee's email was not working’. He would then send responses through email to the employee asking for information about his email. Why would you send an email to the employee when the employee's email is not working? If they are having email problems, they cannot respond to that email! He would do this for a week, or until the manager would call in or respond to the submitted ticket asking for an update. Then, he would ask questions about our ticketing system we used. We've been using the same ticketing system since we started. He would ask the same question again after five years of working in this company!”*

Frustration 3. *“The call queue worked with one phone number, so when we were on the queue, the first person into the queue would receive and answer the call. Then, go back to the line. There were several occasions that Smith would be on the phone for a really long time and blocking the queue. Then,*

he would send the ticket to someone who is not in a queue, or wrong tier, or wrong group. Because of his multiple mistakes, the company changed the policy for both day and night shift: Tier 1 can only send tickets to Tier 2. That is inefficient and ridiculous!”

WE ARE DONE WITH HIM!

On multiple occasions, the night shift team brought concerns about Smith to the management. However, over the five year period, the management had the same answer: “team members should help each other.”

“We were angry at having to answer the same repeated questions over and over. We were even more upset about having to fix his work, and felt bad for the clients who would call and get Smith. They would be on the phone with Smith for one or more hours, and things didn’t get fixed. So, they had him transfer the call to us. Then, we would have the issue fixed within 15-20 minutes. We got to the point where we would rather do the work as have to go back behind Smith and do cleanup.”

Smith’s questions got even worse when the company added Network Operation Center (NOC) service in 2017 fall. With the NOC service, there would be an alert when a device was down. When there was an alert, the team had to determine if the device really was down or it was a false alarm. One night there was a false alarm, and the team told Smith that the device was not down, so he should not call the client. Smith still called the client in the middle of night of the false alarm. Their client was very angry, and all team members had to deal with his mistake.

Finally, Brown and the other team members had enough. The night shift team had done everything they could to support Smith and help him improve his computer skills, communication skills (both on the phone and in the ticketing system), and proper team etiquette. Brown, William, and Murray got together for a small meeting when Smith was out. They were all stressed from Smith, and they agreed something had to be done. During the meeting, they collected example tickets that were poorly handled by him. They also discussed how they could take it to management.

“We sent an email to Frank (the supervisor) and Jeff (manager). During this meeting with Frank and Jeff, we presented our cases and stories first. Then, we provided tickets Smith had closed (which should not have), and those Smith worked on (but we had to finish), and tickets he should have completed (but sent to someone else to complete).”

They showed management the lack of communication and lack of following the template in the tickets. They provided numerous examples of his inability to do IT

work, such as repeatedly asking for an update from an end-user through email when that end-user was having email problems.

After the meeting with the night shift team, Frank Sanchez and Jeff Myer knew they had to give them a good answer. They promised to get back to them by next morning.

GLOSSARY

A+: an entry-level computer certification for PC computer service technicians.

CCNA(Cisco Certified Network Associate): an information technology certification from Cisco Systems. It is an associate-level Cisco Career certification for configuring and troubleshooting Cisco routers and switches.

NET+: a certificate that proves an IT professional's expertise in managing, maintaining, troubleshooting, installing, and configuring basic computer networks.

Ticketing system: a software program that enables organizations to resolve their internal IT support queries by managing and streamlining the process of issue resolution.

VPN (Virtual Private Network): it allows a remote computer to connect to business resources and software. Also, it creates a safe and encrypted connection while maintaining privacy through security procedures and tunneling protocols.