

# Staff-led group yields productivity gains

A staff-led initiative is building support and yielding gains in productivity for administrators who use Department Manager software.

Many departments use the system, which is made up of multiple modules for tasks such as managing and tracking grants, personnel and budgets.

"A user group is very common with software products and we thought it made sense to start one here," said Bev Savage, a research administrator in the Department of Anesthesiology, who is spearheading the DM user group here in conjunction with her supervisor, Yvonne Brewster.

An initial survey, conducted a year ago, showed that 26 departments used DM in fiscal year 2016. Each area negotiates its own contract, chooses the modules it wants, and customizes them to meet its needs, Savage said.

"Various departments within the University use the software and we learned that some departments have functionality that others wanted," specifically the ability to import data from Pitt's general ledger system, she said.

DM can be used to expand on University level reports to provide more meaningful reports to investigators, particularly with regard to projecting budget encumbrances.

"The goal is to provide the best reports we can to the (primary investigators), not to make one system balance to another," said Savage.

The downside to customization is a lack of uniformity, which can be problematic when administrators change departments or when experienced users leave the University.

Users pass down information they've learned over the years to colleagues, said Brewster. While there is a support site online, in most areas there are no user manuals. "Over time you learn to make it work," she said.

"We're all self-trained here," Savage said, noting that different departments have different practices.

The DM user group's initial

goals focused on sharing user knowledge in order to improve the reports that can be generated and to explore the possibility of uniting users under a master agreement, in hopes of saving money.

Efforts to pursue a uniform contract appear to be at a standstill, but that hasn't slowed progress on the group's goal of creating a network for staff who use the software, in hopes of streamlining knowledge and encouraging best practices to eliminate duplication of effort and create more uniformity across the board.

"It's about trying to get the best and most functionality out of the modules," Brewster said. "People don't know the capabilities."

One huge timesaver revolves around automating the import of level reports into the DM account module — turning a task that could take weeks to do by hand into a five-minute job.

That frees up staff time for more analytical work, such as compliance analyses, "which is what these administrators are hired to do and are expert in," Savage said. The result: better, more timely reports.

The user group's inaugural meeting last August was well received. More than 100 people responded, Savage noted. In addition to quarterly large-group meetings, subgroups meet more regularly for hands-on sessions that may focus on specifics of the various modules, including the grants, accounting and personnel modules.

"We broke it down in order to have more meaningful meetings," said Savage, who coordinates most of the subgroups, which typically meet for an hour every month.

The time is filled with "aha" moments as participants share their tips, tricks and expertise and get help with problems.

Meeting minutes and informational handouts from the subcommittees are shared via a group Box account.

Meetings are kept short and to the point, given that everyone has their own daily work to get



Kimberly K. Barlow/University Times

Bev Savage, center, leads research administrators in a Department Manager user group subgroup meeting.

done. "We want to make sure this is as productive and meaningful to people as possible," she said.

Among the proponents of the group is Mary Lou Benedetti, who supervises administrators in pathology.

When she received initial details on the group, "I wanted to participate immediately," she said, adding that she wanted both to learn and to be able to share her group's knowledge.

"Department Manager is a resource we use, and we use more of the modules than many areas do," she said.

She's made a point to try to attend all the meetings, sometimes accompanied by employees in the research areas she supervises. They always come back with new solutions.

"We're always looking for ways to do things: There's input information that we don't know about, also ways to get information out that we don't know about," she said. She's also gained better understanding of the connections between modules, she said.

"This group is very helpful," she said, adding that she's also benefited from connections made across the broader campus.

Benedetti said she was surprised to discover so many DM users on the lower campus. (Savage's survey found that nearly 60 percent of DM users are in the School of Medicine.) "It's a great way to connect," Benedetti said.

Another supporter is Jim Kaczynski, executive administrator in the medical school's Department of Pharmacology and Chemical Biology. He first encountered DM when he took over administration for developmental biology nearly two years ago. "You'd think you'd have pretty much the same system ... How complicated could it be?" he thought — only to find it to be nothing like what he was accustomed to.

He was left to figure out a system that had evolved over multiple predecessors, without manuals. "There's no granular explanation when something doesn't work," he said of the online support. "The help isn't step-by-step to lead a user through all the functions."

While there's a culture of support among administrators who share what they know with colleagues — "You always have someone to go to," he said — the patchwork of systems is less

than ideal.

"It's supposed to help you, not hurt you," he said, noting that some features go unused, avoided or adapted when people don't know how to use them.

"We want to get the most bang for our buck," he said, comparing the situation to having a Phillips screwdriver when a flathead is needed. "But you have a screwdriver," Kaczynski said.

"We're trying to make it easier," he said. The system works, "but we can make it work much better. It doesn't make sense to struggle through."

He favors a single system, but worries that the group may be losing momentum in its drive for a master agreement. "It would be nice to have everyone with the same," he said. "But having a user group for anything is helpful to people, just to connect people together."

"We'll always do what we can to help each other, but who else is out there who can help us? We're trying to make the circle larger," he said.

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For information on the group, email [dmgroup@upmc.edu](mailto:dmgroup@upmc.edu).

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