*By Bill Boothe*

# Software Product Champions

One of the most difficult challenges in managing computer technology for private clubs is providing adequate user support.

Traditionally, club management has looked to the software vendors to provide support – in the form of 24/7 telephone assistance, printed or on-line manuals/help, on-line access by the vendor to the club's software for diagnostic purposes, user-group meetings, classroom and on-site refresher training, and most recently, web-based support and training.

The common ingredient in all of these is the same: the software vendor provides the assistance and expertise.

For years we've been encouraging our clients to add a critical ingredient to the traditional support recipe – support and expertise provided internally by club employees.

This approach has proven extremely effective in clubs that have adopted it and kept it alive over a number of seasons. The key players in the approach are called software product champions. These champions are existing club employees (not technical specialists) from each club department, with primary responsibility for the core application software (accounting, membership, POS, inventory, reservations) used within their home departments.

Our experience has proven that champions can greatly improve the club's success in implementing and maintaining today's complex application software. Yet most clubs do not support a formal champions program. Instead, clubs depend on a few "computer literate" individuals to surface and "volunteer" for the champion duties. We recommend that clubs create a formal champions program to assure that new systems are implemented properly, and that existing systems continue to function at optimal efficiency.

## Champion responsibilities

Software champions are responsible for a number of tasks. The ultimate success of the club's software rests heavily with the dedication and capabilities of the champions. Listed below are the champion's duties within a formal champion program:

*1. Master the software applications.* First and foremost, champions are responsible for mastering their appointed software application(s). Champions should receive complete and thorough training from the vendor on each application and should become familiar with all available documentation for those applications.

*2. Pilot test the software.* In a previous article (PCTU March/April, 2001) we reviewed our recommendations for pilot testing of new application software. The testing process calls for the club's champions to perform detailed testing of all software functions prior to taking the software live. The process includes documenting any functionality issues identified during testing and reporting them to the software vendor for resolution.

*3. Take on-going responsibility.* Once the software is operational at the club, the champions take the lead role in operating their assigned application(s). For some champions this might include sole responsibility for an application, as in a small club with a single person (the controller) responsible for general ledger. Or for a larger club, the restaurant POS champion might have the primary responsibility for menu maintenance, along with new server training. The key to success is to have champions responsible for assuring the on-going operational success of the club's core software applications.

*4. Interact with the software vendor.* Champions are in the best position to understand the club's specific software problems/issues and effectively communicate with the software vendor. In fact, the vendors are very supportive of the champions' concept, knowing that well-trained club employees are far superior to untrained individuals in solving software issues. To emphasize this value, some vendors specify that only well-trained individuals should be contacting the vendor support lines.

*5. Interact with the club's technology professionals.* For those clubs that employ their own professionals, as well as those outsourcing that function to a local provider, champions act as their "eyes and ears" on the firing line to report issues as they occur. Experienced champions can provide critical insights for determining the actual source of systems problems and help separate the application software issues from problems related to network or equipment issues.

## Lead and back-up champions

Historically, a major challenge of private club management has been handling employee turnover. For some clubs, turnover is a severe issue. For others, it is an occasional bother. In either case, turnover of a software prod-

uct champion can be traumatic to club operations. To minimize the effect of a champion leaving the club, we recommend that, where practical, each application have a lead and a backup champion. Backup champions are generally a bit less experienced than lead champions, but receive all of the same training and attention afforded the lead. This redundancy in expertise comes in handy when any champion leaves the club.

## Formal responsibilities

To make sure the champions approach takes hold and stays active, we strongly recommend that the lead and back-up champion responsibilities be included in the club's human resources procedures. The following will help guarantee the on-going success of the champions program:

*1. Add champion duties to job descriptions.* By including the specific champion responsibilities in the appropriate job descriptions, management can demonstrate its commitment to the program and emphasize the on-going importance of the champion role.

*2. Perform regular evaluations of champions.* As part of the employee's regular performance evaluation, management should include performance criteria to cover the unique champion duties assigned.

*3. Reflect champion duties in compensation.* As with any special skills or responsibilities, champions should be rewarded financially for their efforts. In most cases, champions perform their special work in addition to their regular job and should be recognized financially for this important contribution to the club's success.

Clubs that use the champions program find that the initial implementation and the on-going operations of their computer software are greatly enhanced by the work of their software product

champions. For a minimal financial investment, management can formalize the champions' procedures and reinforce their on-going use in all club departments. A successful champions program offers great value to the club by enhancing the overall success of the club's computer systems, increasing member satisfaction with the club's technology, and maximizing the club's return on its technology investment. **BR**

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