



The University of
Montana



Date: April 22, 2005
To: Commissioner Stearns, Regent Barrett
From: Ray Ford – UM AVP for IT
Mark Sheehan – MSU Exec. Director for Info. Services
Re: Recommendation on laptops for the Regents

At the March Board of Regents meetings a discussion on moving the meetings and participants into a more “electronic” mode of operation led to a suggestion that we start by supporting the use of laptops by Regents. During the discussion all Regents noted that they either owned laptops or had access to them through their employers, so the starting assumption was that we would focus on providing wired or wireless network access during the meeting, make materials available electronically in a format suitable for the laptop, etc. As we thought more about this, then talked briefly with Regent Barrett during a break, some potential problems in this as a starting point became obvious. We’ve done additional thinking and would like to summarize some problems with the original plan, then propose what we think is a reasonable alternative.

Use of Employer’s Laptop Computer for Official BoR Business

Even assuming that the official policies of an employer permit use of a company laptop computer for BoR purposes, there are still problems. An employer-owned laptop comes with software from one or more vendors and licensed to the employer; the laptop also usually contains data owned by the employer. An employer should have concerns that other uses of this computer not violate its software licenses and not put its data at risk of inappropriate disclosure. The fact that these are real concerns becomes obvious when one considers what could (most likely would) happen if a Regent had trouble getting the laptop to work at a BoR meeting. Typically the Regent would ask MUS staff (e.g., a system administrator from OCHE or the host site) for assistance, and the staff member would then ask for administrative access to the laptop in order to do troubleshooting and/or setup. Unfortunately, providing administrative access to anyone, for any reason, outside of the employer organization is simply not a good idea because of the potential it has for inappropriate data access. The conclusion Regent Barrett and I drew is that the potential for conflict is inevitable, so relying on laptops provided by “others” is simply not the way to approach this. Instead, the MUS/BoR needs to own and provide the laptops.

Cost and Operational Issues with MUS-Owned Laptops

The price of a laptop computer can range from under \$1,000 to over \$2,000, depending on how it is purchased, what model is selected, whether extended warranty is included, etc. Software purchase and upgrade and ongoing maintenance of the computer drives the total cost of ownership even higher. The key to keeping the price low is deciding exactly how to buy the laptop. MUS campuses already do bulk (discounted) purchases of this type of hardware, and some campuses have campus-wide software agreements in place. If a campus buys and officially owns a laptop, then assigns it to a staff member or affiliate, the hardware can be purchased at a discount and software is essentially free (covered by the campus agreement). We would need to check this with an attorney, but we believe use by a Regent as a campus affiliate would be consistent with our campus licensing agreements, allowing us to obtain reasonable hardware, extended hardware warranty, and software for about \$1500/laptop, or seven laptops for \$10,500.

As MUS equipment assigned to MUS affiliates, the Regents' laptops would be covered by MUS "acceptable use" policies. These policies provide general guidelines but recognize that specific details of use must be worked out between staff member and supervisor on a case by case basis. We think it would be relatively easy to develop guidelines specific to these laptops, covering what the Regents are authorized to do with the systems and permitting access to the laptops for setup and support purposes by MUS or other appropriate IT staff (e.g., staff at a non-MUS site when meetings are hosted there). Thus we think the Regents could operate MUS-owned laptops within MUS-approved policies.

We'll add one final, somewhat-more-technical recommendation about wireless networking. Wireless access is provided in a variety of different ways at the institutions the BoR uses for its meetings, and there are different setup and security implications at each site. Rather than modify the collection of laptops to meet site-specific specifications for each meeting, we recommend that the Board acquire its own wireless access point device (for about \$700), set up an appropriate level of security between the laptops and that access point, and then move it from site to site. Doing so will require setup by the host campus's network staff, but this can be done in advance generally without requiring access to the laptops. The strong, cost-effective advantage of this approach is the convenience to the Regents of not having to check their laptops in with a support person prior to each meeting.

The bottom line is that OCHE would have to allocate about \$11,200, or about \$535 per Regent per year on a three year replacement cycle, to implement a "laptops for Regents" plan. If the Board approves this approach and this level of expenditure, we can proceed to work out the details and move in this direction. We await the Board's decision.