

INTERVIEW WITH ICT MAINTAINANCE MANAGER MICHAELINA ALMAZ YOHANNIS

The Maintenance Section is one of the core sections of ICT. It is the section mandated to ensure the purchase, replacement and implementation of critical equipment at the Data Centre and offices. This equipment include; the Interruptible Power System,(UPS), Line Printers, Air Conditioners (ACs) generators and all other machinery used in the offices.

This section is headed by Michaelina Almaz. She had a sit down with us to tell us more on this important section

Please tell us in brief about your University Education

I did an undergraduate course at JKUAT in Radio, T.V & Electronics in 1987. I later went to the USA and did another undergraduate Course in BSc Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at the University of California Berkeley in 1993. This university performs exceptionally well in the web metrics ranking. In the 2016 ranking it was position 4.

How long have you worked for the university

I have worked for 13 years. Since 2004

What would you say is your greatest accomplishment since you started working for the University?

This has to be the streamlining of the maintenance section leading to smooth running of all the critical services. When I joined here we had an old generator that used to pack every time, many things used to fail and ICT staff would not be able to carry out their duties which are very essential to the running of the university. During my tenure I have ensured that the old generator is fixed, we also bought a new one, all the old ACs and UPSs were also replaced with new ones that function efficiently. In short, I have put things in place where they are operating smoothly.

Your work is really technical; Repairs and Maintenance. Why did you choose this line of work which ideally most women don't pick?

My 'O' level grades in Sciences were very good. I wanted to do food processing in the university because that is what all women were doing. But the selection board chose for me to undertake a course in Radio, T.V & Electronics. We were just two women in our class and along the way I just fell in love with it.

As one of the founding members of the Maintenance Section, please share a brief history of the section

In 2004, Professor Waema; who was then the Director ICT, saw the need of creating a section that would be in charge of the procurement and maintenance of the electrical equipment needed to run the datacenter and related departments .When I came I was assigned the duty of a maintenance Manager. Before I came to the University I had worked for Motorola; a multinational company in USA where I had hands on experience in engineering work and therefore I did not face a lot of challenges. I was the only

staff in this department and I faced a lot of problems since most of the equipment was old and needed a lot of input. In 2008, I recruited one staff into the section; Paul Mulonzya. Then again I procured for new equipment and the work became manageable. Later on, I recruited 3 more staff who are now manning the section.

What is the main work of this section?

The major work that is undertaken by the section is to service the equipment at the Data Centre and also all other machinery used in the offices.

What are some of the challenges that you in this section

Sometimes we are not involved in the purchasing of equipment and when it's done, the warranties are not signed for; which is a challenge because it forces us to repair and buy new parts once the machines get broken though they should be serviced by the company.

The Maintenance section is no longer independent. We have now been incorporated with the User Support. I feel this is a core section that should stand on its own.

There is no laid down procedure in procuring the equipment

There is no major training for maintenance people

Gender balance-am still the only woman in maintenance

How many members of staff did you start with? Would you say more women are embracing taking technical jobs?

I was all alone when we started. I was later joined by 3 other staff members.

What projects has the section undertaken

As I said earlier, we have upgraded all the machinery in the data Centre, including new line printers that are fast and efficient, new and modern ACs which cool the entire center, a fast and efficient generator and UPS.

Where do you see maintenance in future?

We are going the laptop way and the maintenance staff should be skilled depending on the upcoming technology. They should be trained on new skills because new technology needs new skills. The future could also mean outsourcing services where the university can decide to be leasing equipment for maybe three years though this is very expensive

Considering that the IT field is constantly changing and new technology is introduced every so often, what career advice would you give students pursuing this field?

You can never go wrong with technology it is constantly changing and evolving. I especially urge the young ladies to go for it. It is not a course for the men only.

Finally who is your mentor?

Dr. Agnes Wausi, the Director SCI (School of Computing & Informatics) and Prof. Waema. He is a good leader and he started ICT center. It was during his time that I came to ICT and even though I got a rough time, Pro Waema held my hand. I also mentor young students through the MasterCard Scholarship Foundation

Parting Shot?

Don't get too comfortable, go out there and do other things and bring new skills that can make ICT better

Ms.Almaz is currently undertaking a PHD Course in Information Systems on Linking Climate Information to Livelihood Strategies through ICTs among Rural Women in Kitui County.