



Get Cozy with IT Staff.



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Don't buy in to the computer-geek stereotype, and other ways to build productive relationships with high-tech gurus

Here's a legendary story in technology circles that involves the Unbelievable Help Desk Call. The story begins when the help desk technician answers the phone and the user reports that his computer screen is blank. The technician talks the user through a series of steps to isolate the problem: looking at the indicator lights on the monitor, checking the cable between the computer and monitor, and rebooting the computer. Finally the technician asks if the computer is plugged in:

User: I can't tell if it's plugged in. I guess I'll need to get a flashlight. I'm going to put you on hold.

Technician: Wait a minute. Why do you need a flashlight?

User: All the lights in my office are off. I think we blew a breaker.

The Unbelievable Help Desk Call is both humorous and tragic because the problem it illustrates is not really that unbelievable. For many IT (information technology) professionals, working with users is the most difficult part of their job. And for many office professionals, the hardest part of using a computer is getting assistance from IT professionals when things go wrong.

While software is becoming more complex, user support is moving farther away from computer users. Ten years ago, most large and midsized organizations had help desk staff dedicated to supporting end users. If you called the help desk often enough, they knew you by name. Often they remembered the last prob-

lem you'd called them about. If you couldn't describe your problem over the phone, they would come to your desk so they could experience your problem firsthand. Today, a steadily growing number of organizations are outsourcing user support. The person who answers the help desk phone may be in another state or country. In either case, they aren't going to stroll by your desk any time soon.

Software and hardware manufacturers are also changing their support philosophy. Some manufacturers have outsourced support. Others are charging \$50 or \$100 for each support incident or eliminating phone support entirely and replacing it with e-mail or newsgroup support. One application has been jokingly referred to as the "helpless desk." Users are invited to post questions on the manufacturer's Web site so other users can post answers. The most frequently posted reply reads "I have this problem, too. If you find a solution, let me know."

As organizations and manufacturers cut back on formal support for computer users, the role of the successful administrative assistant is being forced to evolve: from user to power user to application specialist. More than half of the

sions that affect administrative assistants. But to work with IT professionals, you must be able to communicate with them.

Speaking the Language

Communication is the first building block in the admin/IT relationship. If you think your IT staff is speaking a different language, it's because they are. Computing has its own jargon, just like medicine or automobile maintenance. The language is descriptive, and precision is important. Everything you can touch, turn on, disconnect, launch, click on, delete, or manipulate has a specific name. For example, the cable that connects your computer to the network isn't just a cable. It's a network cable, most likely a CAT5 patch cable. It's called a CAT5 patch cable or a network cable to distinguish it from other types of cables: serial cables, parallel cables, PS/2 cables, and cables too numerous to mention. When you're asking for a replacement cable, the distinction is important.

If you aren't a technical person, important distinctions may appear to be trivial. Last week, a colleague was describing his reaction to a meeting

didn't mean Palms. My colleague just bought a Palm, so the distinction might be important to him.

You don't need to know technology jargon to participate in a technology conversation, but it helps if you're curious and willing to ask questions. If everyone's talking about a 1394 connection and you don't know what it is, ask. Once in a while you'll find someone who uses terminology to intimidate, stuffing as much jargon as they can into every conversation. But most people want to be understood and will explain what you need to know. If you're too shy to ask or the term is in an e-mail message or report, try looking it up online. For example, if you Google "1394 connection," you'll find a number of easy-to-read explanations of FireWire technology. (How do you Google? Open your Internet browser and go to www.google.com.)

Build Real Relationships

As with any relationship, a little respect goes a long way. Unfortunately, nontechnological people find it easy to belittle people who are having technical conversations. Maybe it's a holdover from picking on "geeks" in junior high school. If there are two IT staffers in a room of 50 people, those two people will somehow find each other (maybe they scan the room to see if anyone else has a SmartPhone) and start talking TCP/IP, Unix, XML, or VB.NET. They'll have a great time, swapping bits and bytes instead of words and sentences. Often, someone who's watching their spirited technological conversation will interrupt to say, "I don't understand anything you folks are talking about and I don't want to know." (Rather rude, don't you think? Imagine responding that way to a third-grader who's reporting her day at school or a friend who's talking about her promotion.) IT people are used to it, but they like it even less in a business meeting than they did in junior high.

Jargon is only part of the problem. Timing plays a critical role in the admin/IT relationship. Many IT professionals only hear from users who are in crisis: users with lost files, nonresponsive print queues, fried hard drives, or mail merges that aren't merging. And the users

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IAAP members surveyed in workshops conducted by the authors last year reported that they regularly provide training or user support for other employees in their organization on core applications like Microsoft Word, Excel, Outlook, and PowerPoint. Admins who can forge a strong partnership with their IT staff are better positioned to request training and resources, provide feedback on user experiences across the enterprise, and positively influence technology deci-

about some proposed technology. He complained, "When the IT people kept talking about PDAs, I didn't know what they meant. Why didn't they just say Palms?" I explained that they might have been talking about personal digital assistants in general, not Palms in particular. Or maybe they were talking about both PocketPCs and Palms; or about PocketPCs and Psions—PDAs that aren't Palms. They were IT people, so I assume that they didn't say Palms because they

who are calling the IT people are frazzled and frustrated. It's hard to build a relationship from occasional crisis-driven interactions. Over time, both users and IT staff develop a skewed picture of the other: less competent, less knowledgeable, incredibly demanding, and often downright cranky.

Build the relationship with your IT staff by ensuring that there are positive, noncrisis interactions that more than balance the moments of sheer panic. If someone provides an answer that helps you get your work done on time, e-mail your gratitude. When you read an interesting article about technology, send your favorite IT person a copy. Invite an IT staffer to lunch or a coffee break and tell them what's working instead of what's not. Send a plate of cookies to the help desk staff to thank them for always being there. It's nice to know they're available, even when you aren't having a crisis.

Become an Expert

IT staff don't know everything about technology. In most organizations, the most proficient application users aren't in IT, they're in the other business units. One company, for instance, has five Microsoft Excel experts. Only one is in the IT department. Two are in the marketing department, one is in manufacturing, and one is in accounting. Each is expert in how Excel is used in their area, and two of the experts can tell you how Excel is used in a number of other departments.

Great IT departments know who the expert business users are for every application in the organization and consider those users' needs when they evaluate application upgrades or modifications. They value their expert users as important resources for the IT team.

It's never too late to become an expert. Begin by selecting an application. Most users spend the majority of their time in no more than three applications. Identify your core applications and then find the in-house expert for each. (If there is no expert for one of your core applications, you might also choose an application with an acknowledged expert user.) Check with IT staff to make sure the applications you're considering aren't

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being replaced or phased out. Spend a lunch hour researching online and print resources (Web sites, books, online classes) for each application. Research certification options such as the Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS) certification. Talk with one or two colleagues to find out how they use the applications, what their experience has been, and how often they need assistance. Based on your research, choose an application to specialize in.

Explore the user interface of your chosen application. Learn the name of each screen feature and button. Browse the Help file to see if there are topics you know nothing about. Buy a comprehensive book on the application. Skim the parts you already know, then read and try anything that's new. When reviewing functionality that you haven't used before, imagine one way you and other admins could use it to benefit your organization. If there are certification exams available for your application, take the tests and get certified.

When you're ready to be recognized for your expertise, choose one incredibly useful feature in your application and prepare a short (20 minutes or less) presentation to demonstrate its use. Create a handout with a brief description and all the steps needed to use the feature. If there are other experts on the application, work with them to create a series of demonstrations showcasing different product features. Have one of your new friends on the IT staff review your materials. Invite one or two or 20 of your coworkers to a feature demonstration. Solicit their feedback, and ask for suggestions on other features they'd like to know more about.

While you must work to become an expert, it's relatively easy to remain one. Encourage your coworkers to bring you their most difficult problems in your

chosen application. Solving their issues and communicating your solutions will challenge you to deepen and expand your expertise.

Be an IT Volunteer

Many IT departments involve users in IT functions such as product review, vendor selection, or usability testing. Whether you're serving as a business liaison for a potential product or testing the new version of WinZip, working with IT staff on a project is a great way to enhance your IT relationships and increase your visibility in the organization.

Put It All Together

You're honing your technological communication skills, building relationships with IT, volunteering for work with IT projects, and cultivating your reputation as an application expert. There's one more critical task: Market your increased value to the organization. Share your goals (such as building your application skills, leading workshops for other employees) and celebrate your successes with your supervisor in writing. Communicate regularly with your supervisor about your work on IT projects, what you've learned, and the value your participation provides to your department and the organization.

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