

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Get With the Program

By Douglas E. Welch

Programming has never been an easy high-tech career path. Whether you are working in a corporate cube farm or on your own, the technical issues of programming languages, data architecture, and accessibility issues are trouble enough, but the people issues can be even more challenging. If you are planning on striking off into the programming field, you would do well to consider the following issues.

When Do I Get Paid?

One of the greatest challenges for a freelance programmer is closing the deal. Too many clients want to endlessly “specify” you to death. Some companies will not blink at asking for four or more meetings to discuss the type of system they want, all without paying a dime. While you may be tempted to keep the relationship going in hopes of a sale, after the second meeting with the client, you should be working under some form of contract.

Specifying the function and structure of a program or computer system is as important (if not more than) as writing the actual code. You should be paid for your experience and your efforts just as if you were writing the program itself. In fact, as you move through the specification process, you are probably already making decisions about overall data structures, user interface, and database management.

Beyond the issues of contracts and payments, there are a host of other pitfalls in the specification process. Too many clients will come to you with the “Swiss Army Knife” project that is supposed to not only automatically close the quarterly books, but also monitor the status of the company’s coffee pots. It is to the benefit of both your client and yourself to find no more than two major issues to address in each programming project. If the client requires a larger system with more functions, break it up into several sub-projects with their own specifications and contracts. It may sound like more trouble to negotiate items separately, but it really helps to clarify goals, deliverables, and change orders in the future.

Change Orders

If you want to insure a calm programming life, you must address the issues of project changes that happen as

the project develops. Change orders are inevitable. Often a client will spot a problem in the specification only after the program has begun to come together. Also, once the client begins to see what the program *can* do, he or she will come up with many ideas about what it *should* do. In these cases, you need to have a policy about change orders.

I highly recommend that any change orders be treated as mini-projects or, if they are large enough changes, new projects in their own right. By negotiating the terms, scope, and price of these projects now, you will have much fewer problems when it comes to the last project payment. I have seen negotiations over final payments go on for weeks as each side blames each change on the other. Confront this beast up front.

The Beginning of the End

Of course, one of the most difficult parts of any programming project is knowing when it is complete. Clients will push for one more change, and you will be chomping at the bit to move onto something new. If you did your work well in the specification process, though, you will be ahead of the game. As the project moves forward, you should begin developing functionality “punch lists” based on the specification documents. This allows you to slowly “check off” each item as it is completed. These punch lists then give both you and the client a clear indicator of how the project is progressing and what remains to be done. They also establish the concept that the project is complete when all the items on the punch list are addressed. This won’t make you immune from the various “end-of-project” issues, but it can go a long way toward reducing their severity.

I am sure many of you thought programming was all about dealing with C++, SQL, PHP, and more. I hope this column has opened your eyes to some of the project-related and people-related issues that will affect your high-tech career. □

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