CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Ready for Prime Time

By Douglas E. Welch

Regardless of where you pursue your high-tech career, there are a number of pitfalls that can make your work more difficult and your career less secure. One of the most common happens to be unreliable technology systems and the effect they have on your clients. Users have long memories, especially when it comes to technology that fails regularly or with damaging results. Even worse, they will remember (and often refuse to use) systems in the future, based on these bad first impressions.

Lack of Trust

While it may seem a bit irrational for clients to write off your technological projects, I have seen it happen more than once. In one case, back in the early days of networking, a large corporation worked very hard to develop a network linking all sorts of remote buildings and locations. Unfortunately, the networking system was less than robust. The network would often crash and, in the then-current environment of Windows 3.1, each user's PC would hang completely, losing all the work not saved up to that point. You can imagine the individual user's frustration.

These networking issues were solved fairly quickly, but the users had had such a bad experience, countless of them would refuse to use the network servers. They would store all their files locally even though the IT department had explained the benefits of data backups and the ease of sharing their files with their co-workers. The damage had clearly been done. A few months of unreliability and the users would never again trust the network system.

Tread Lightly

As this example shows, it can be very important to have systems well tested long before they are released to the general public. You can never make a second "first impression" in life or in high-tech work. If your systems are flaky or deliver far less than the needs of your users, you may have a hard time ever winning users back to your side. Once you lose the trust of your users in one area, your overall reputation can be damaged.

Whenever you are developing a system, ensure that you have all of the major bugs worked out before you show it to the first end-user, though you may be pressured into an early release by your direct management or higher-up executives. This is fairly common in all companies, which requires you to convey to the "powers that be" that the success of the entire project, and many projects to come, depends on delivering a fully functional product that the users will adopt and use. Delivering an unreliable product, even one that performs some functions extremely well, can lead to many larger problems down the road.

When you are testing your new systems, cultivate a collection of people who understand both the needs of the system and your needs as a technology worker. These tech-friendly people can assist you in working out the bugs of a system, but they also understand the process. You shouldn't have to worry about these people lacking trust in your systems when they are finally implemented. They understand that there will be flaws as the system is developed.

With the help of "user advisors," you can develop your system in a safe environment and avoid beta-testing your systems on the general populous. This will help to prevent any nasty surprises from arising that could damage the trust of your users.

Computer users can have extremely long memories. This is true whether you are developing software systems inside a corporate environment, as a freelance consultant, or even as a software manufacturer for the world at large. Test your systems well, with the input of knowledgeable users before releasing it. Protect the success of your company, the trust of your users and your own high-tech career by ensuring that the systems and software you develop are truly ready for the outside world.   ❏