CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Little Things Mean a Lot

By Douglas E. Welch

You might not think you would learn something about high tech at the local Chuck E. Cheese franchise, but this is exactly what occurred the other day. Due to some technical difficulties at this particular branch, I was reminded of a basic truism of technology: Little things mean a lot.

As the father of a 5-year-old, I spend more time than I care to admit attending birthday parties at CEC. It seems that every child in my son's preschool class is intent on keeping the company in business for at least the next several years. I have had an opportunity to visit several different locations, so I know the basic layout of the establishment's shows and how the technology is supposed to work. Unfortunately, at one location, the technology was not working very well. Even though the failures were small, it created quite a negative feeling in both the children and the adults.

In this particular case, some of the hands-on interactive controls and displays were not functioning correctly, so the kids had less to do. The ultimate issue, though, was as simple as a non-functioning curtain, which was supposed to conceal the animatronic Chuck E. Cheese when he is "off stage." This allowed the kids to see Chuck's lifeless figure during the show, and even when the live, costumed character entered the room for the birthday celebration. For want of a curtain, the entire illusion was lost and the experience was less than fulfilling. The multiple characters confused the kids, and the parents felt that they had not received a high-quality experience.

This small failure started me thinking about how small failures can affect even the biggest projects, especially when technology is involved.

Every Day

If you don't pay attention to your technology, the same small failures can play havoc with your high-tech career. Even if your new network installation has had 100 percent uptime, executives tend to remember only that their assistant couldn't print an important document when they needed it. Users of a new database system will ignore all the other benefits of the system if one small but important feature doesn't function as it should.

In the heat of the business day, small problems might not seem important but, in reality, they can cause you some of the biggest problems down the road. When you are defending your next budget or project, you don't want to have to face a recounting of the hundreds of small failures over the previous year. You need to pay close attention to the small problems, as well as the large, if you want to thrive in your high-tech career.

Ducks In a Row

So, what do you do to ensure that your technology projects don't end up in the scrap heap? First, you have to track every trouble report, every bug, every complaint, no matter how small. Even if you can't solve a problem immediately, let your users know that you not only know about the problem, but are also working on it. Give them updates, give them workarounds, but never let them feel that you are doing nothing. Action on your part, even if doesn't solve the problem, helps prevent bad feelings from getting out of hand.

In the end, though, solving the problem is your only choice. You will need to do whatever it takes to make your users happy, even if the problem might seem inconsequential. Problems that go unresolved can also lead people to wonder about your expertise and your ability to do your job. You don't want to be in the position of trying to explain how one small problem quickly turned into a time and money quagmire or, worse still, an outright project failure.

It can be dangerous to your career and your job to consider any problem too small to worry about. Technology problems carry different importance for different people. What you may think is unimportant might be someone else's top priority. Don't allow yourself to be misled by your own prejudices. Each problem is important to someone. If you want to ensure the continued success of your high-tech career, you need to make sure the curtain works and the show goes on as planned. ❏

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