

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

On the Inside

By Douglas E. Welch

Working as an independent consultant for small companies has many benefits. The work is varied and you get to deal with a large variety of people. One downside, though, is that the company may not have anyone on its staff who can monitor and manage systems between your visits. This can often lead to confusion and crises when systems don't work as planned. If you want to keep your client relationships on a good footing, you need to have someone on the inside who can be your eyes and ears, even when you are far away.

Volunteers?

The biggest problem in setting up a client computer liaison is finding someone savvy enough—and with enough time—to do the job. Often, owners and managers don't want their staff members “fiddling with computers” when they should be doing their “real work.” Staffers can also be reluctant to step into this position, fearing—perhaps with good reason—that it will reduce their chances of advancement and raises. It may take a little time and a lot of discussion, but you can usually find someone willing to step in and help out.

Your job is to outline clearly the benefits to the company of having someone on site whom you can assist when things go wrong. Clearly explain that it is not a question of *if* things will go wrong, but more a question of when. Having an on-site liaison will improve your

ability to assist the client, even when you are hundreds of miles away.

Just recently, this fact was brought home to me. An employee had accidentally deleted an important file and needed to have it restored from a backup tape. Unfortunately, I visit this client only two days a week, and wasn't scheduled to be on site until after the weekend. In talking with the client, I realized that no one there had ever learned anything about the backup system. Some people were totally unaware of the location of the system, let alone its operation. This made it nearly impossible for me to even walk someone through the restoration procedure. Luckily, they were able to do without this file until my next visit; otherwise, I would have had to make a special trip for something that should have been simple and straightforward.

As it so happens, this client recently hired a new employee who has a strong computer background. With the client's permission, I have begun introducing this employee to the company's computer systems, and asking him to assist with problems such as the one above. The relationship is already bearing fruit. Not one week later, I needed someone to perform a simple tape swap on the backup system. Even without detailed knowledge of the system, I was easily able to talk my new on-site client liaison through the procedure over the phone.

Computer Experts Not Required

Your client liaison doesn't need to be a computer expert. At the most basic level, he or she must simply be able to follow your directions on the phone. This is not to

say that a computer-savvy person doesn't help, though. As someone gains computer skills, you can turn over specific ongoing tasks for her to handle, without you needing to monitor each step. Operations like swapping backup tapes, adding and removing user IDs, or returning faulty hardware can be done more easily and more quickly by someone inside the organization.

Your most important task is to educate the person about the difference between what he knows, what he thinks he knows, and what he doesn't know. Too often, people assume they know more than they do, especially about computers. Liaisons must understand that if they are unsure of anything, they should call you *before* they do anything.

It is important for you to be available by phone, e-mail or instant messaging, especially early in your relationship. While it may feel like the client liaison is calling you every minute, it is important to allow her to grow into the position. As the liaison becomes more comfortable, the calls will decrease. If you sound annoyed or distracted every time she calls, she will stop calling and attempt to take on more than she can be expected to do.

This will ultimately lead to errors and frantic calls for you to come in and fix the problem. You should avoid this at all costs.

While it may seem silly to have a client liaison performing tasks for you and reducing your billable hours, the simple fact is that you want to concentrate on the larger issues, not on swapping backup tapes. A liaison frees you to confront the larger issues, and dramatically increases the level of support you are able to offer. In the long run, everyone benefits. □

Douglas E. Welch is a freelance writer from Van Nuys, California, and can be reached by e-mail at douglas@welchwrite.com or on the Web at www.welchwrite.com.

HELP WANTED

■ **TECHNICAL SALES**—F/T or P/T representing local consultants in San Diego county. Great B2B software. Generous commissions, protected area, great opportunity! E-mail resume today: sales@sditpros.com.