

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

MS-ing Around

By Douglas E. Welch

Yet another security patch. Yet another bug fix. Yet another day of downloads. Are you as fed up with Microsoft (and other software manufacturers) as I am? I would estimate that more than one-half of my billable hours are spent installing patches or working around flaws in commercial software. It amazes me that we have let the state of computer software get so out of hand.

While most high-tech workers see this type of work as just part of the cost of doing business, many companies, both large and small, are questioning their computer support costs. I can understand their concern. There are some days when I feel I should be billing the software manufacturers instead of my clients. I can dream, can't I? It is a rare day when I actually spend time helping my clients be productive. Instead, I am fighting this bug or that, wasting both time and money. Clients are being penalized for choosing software with the (seemingly unrealistic) expectation that it should actually function as advertised.

Special Dispensation

For much too long now, software manufacturers have been given a special dispensation from laws that would require a product to work as promised. In fact, lawmakers are trying to strengthen this protection by promoting UCITA (Uniform Computer Information Transactions Act) as the law of the land. If this happens, "let the buyer beware" will continue to be reality for all software purchasers for a long time to come. (More information on UCITA is available at www.cpsr.org/program/UCITA/ucita-fact.html.)

As any computer user can tell you, it is they who need protection, not the software manufacturers. While relief from liability laws might have made sense in the dark ages of the '80s and '90s, it makes no sense today. The computer industry is made up of multi-billion-dollar companies, not startups in garages.

There is no reason why software manufacturers should not be held to the same standards as others. If a product is flawed, it should be fixed in a timely manner or withdrawn from sale. I am not calling for a hail of lawsuits every time a bug is found, only that companies have recourse when a software manufacturer releases a flawed product and refuses to address these flaws—and their customers' concerns—in a timely manner. To do other-

wise is to cripple the productivity of all other businesses in order to give a break to software manufacturers.

On Your Guard

Until my dream of accountability comes to pass, there are a few things you can do to keep your clients productive instead of mired in software troubleshooting.

Stay abreast of any known bugs and fixes. Most companies, to their credit, provide this information via the Web or e-mail. Not only should you regularly pass on any information you find, you should teach your clients how to find this info on their own. There is an added benefit in that your clients will quickly see where their software troubles arise, and not blame the beleaguered tech-support person.

Automate the search for and installation of software updates. The easiest way to avoid computer problems is to run the built-in software-update programs provided with your software. Better yet, you should schedule these updates to occur automatically whenever possible.

The most important of these updates is antivirus programs. Most problems with computer viruses are preventable if your clients keep their antivirus programs up to date.

Your clients should next be sure to run Windows Update, or Software Update for Macintosh computers. This will help to guard against security problems and other known flaws in the operating system.

Finally, get together with your clients on a regular basis and talk about their computer issues. Too often, recurring problems get lost in the daily runaround. Scheduling time to talk about and discover recurring computer problems can keep them from turning into productivity-eating monsters.

While it may be a long time before software manufacturers start taking responsibility for their software, it is something we need to continue working toward. Until that time, you need to help your clients minimize the effects of flawed software. It is in the best interest of both your clients and your high-tech career. □

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