

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Crisis Computing

By Douglas E. Welch

There is an old saying about the ability to “keep one’s head when all about are losing theirs.” While this saying was forged in war, it applies quite well to the success of a high-tech career. You will often face clients and coworkers who don’t always keep their heads in a crisis. Worse still, they can spread their sense of panic to yourself and others, which is a surefire way to keep from focusing on finding a solution to the problem.

Crisis Computing

No one is free from disarray during a computer crisis. I will be the first to admit that I sometimes find myself under so much pressure that I am not thinking as clearly as possible. This can lead you to take action before you know the true nature of the problem.

Your first goal in a situation like this is to override your instincts and slow down. This can be difficult when people are constantly calling you for the solution you haven’t yet found, or are looking over your shoulder, literally, as you type, but it is an essential first step. If you don’t have a clear view of the problem, you are in danger of doing more harm than good. You want to avoid “crisis computing” at all costs.

Take time to collect your thoughts. Go get a drink of water or a cup of coffee. Go to the bathroom. Go sit in your car for a minute and listen to your favorite radio sta-

tion—alone. Do whatever it takes to give yourself some breathing room. Then you can come back and address the problem in a clear, calm manner. I can guarantee that your work will be 100 percent better. Everyone involved will have had a moment to get a handle on their own emotions. Then you can begin to solve the problem.

Of course, you may have to explain your actions to those around you. Some people may think you are abandoning the problem instead of trying to solve it. They might be inclined to take immediate action despite the issues described above. Calmly explain your actions, while assuring them that you *are* working on the problem.

Look to the Mundane

Another symptom of crisis computing is favoring dramatic actions over the mundane. I frequently get calls from clients who have completely disassembled and reassembled their networks, when a call to their Internet provider would have confirmed that the problem was simply a service outage. Worse still, the client often has changed some software setting or hardware connection that crippled the network once their Internet connection was restored. Similar cases involved users reformatting their computers or reinstalling Windows, when a much simpler fix was available.

Too often, you can jump to extreme measures in an effort to appear to be solving the problem. I find, though, that it is always best to try the least invasive solutions first. It seems obvious, but when you are in the middle of a crisis, your thinking can be clouded. Try to elicit as

much information from your client or colleague as possible. Sometimes you may have to ask the same question several times, in different ways, to get to the heart of the matter. I once had a user whose keyboard started acting up badly, making it impossible for him to type anything. It took me several minutes of gentle questioning before I discovered that he had spilled water onto the keyboard a few days before.

While the keyboard had worked for a while, the water eventually got deeper and deeper into the electronics until it failed completely. Had I not kept asking questions, I might have thought that there were issues with the motherboard of the computer. Instead, the keyboard was easily replaced and all was well.

Don't Be Led Astray

Sometimes, you may have a client who will call with what seems like a simple question. You might answer the question automatically, but then wonder exactly what the user was trying to do. In order to protect yourself and your clients, you have to delve deeper. Often, you will have a better solution to the issue they are trying to address, or you will discover that they are on the verge of doing something damaging to their computer.

For example, a client called with a question about setting up a secondary Internet connection to the company's network. Unfortunately, all he asked at the time was

where to connect the cable to the network hub. This call raised questions in my mind, so I called him back and explained that directly connecting the new Internet connection to the company's network would leave it open to attacks from the outside, and possibly even bring down the entire network. Had I not delved a little deeper into his question, I would have received a crisis call later that day. Do yourself a favor and make sure you know exactly what question you are answering.

Keeping a clear head can be your best tool when confronted with a computer crisis. Take the time to understand a problem clearly before you attempt to solve it. As obvious as this sounds, we can all forget the best way to attack an issue in the heat of the moment. "Keeping your head, when all about you are losing theirs," can help ensure a long and prosperous high-tech career. □

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