CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Keeping Track

By Douglas E. Welch

As a freelance computer consultant, it is very important that I keep a complete record of my work. I need to be able to present a detailed and accurate bill to my client if I expect to get paid in a timely manner. When you are working as a high-tech employee, though, it is too easy to become lax about keeping track of your time and actions.

Even if you are required to prepare regular status reports, these are often general in nature. In today's business climate, you will find that managers are requesting more and more detail about "what you do for us." While sometimes it can appear to be an added and unnecessary burden, tracking your work can help you to protect and build your high-tech career.

Or It Didn't Happen

I came across an interesting rule about tracking your work recently in a magazine article or book. Despite the fact that it wasn't about computer work, it still applies greatly. As I remember it, a scientist stated that when doing lab work on a research project, "If it isn't written down, it didn't happen." This is the same attitude I take to tracking my work. Even if I know I did the work, my client (or manager) doesn't know until it appears in my status report or invoice. Use this phrase as a reminder to document when, where and what work you did, every time.

The goal here is not to bury yourself in paperwork. Instead, keeping track develops an "audit trail" should you ever need to justify your job to management. In today's tough market, such justifications are becoming more and more necessary. Furthermore, developing your justification as you go is faster and develops better results than trying to throw it all together at a moment's notice. You want to have all your trouble tickets in a row, just in case you ever need them.

Make It Easy and Simple

While technology can certainly help you in tracking your work, it is not required. A simple notebook, small enough to fit in a shirt pocket, can suffice. The basic information to track for each piece of work should include date, time, client name, task and time spent. This notebook can then be used to prepare regular status reports or more detailed justifications of your position.

You might also want to track any work that you do outside of work hours. Too often, this work is not documented, even though it could be a significant amount of time. I often have to force myself to log time I spend instant messaging with clients. It can sometimes reach into hours.

You might consider entering all of your notebook data into a spreadsheet or word processing document on your computer. This makes searching and sorting easier, and provides a backup copy should the notebook be lost or damaged. Even better, though, would be to use some organizer that would allow you to capture the information directly in computer format.

How I Do It

Over the years, I have tried a variety of methods in collecting my work data. It often depends on what systems I am required to use by my employer or client. You may be required to enter your trouble tickets or status reports into a particular system. In those cases, you may have to man-

ually enter data from your personal collection of data. Even so, your own personal notebook or computer files will make this data entry faster and easier than if you were trying to recall it from memory.

If you have the freedom to choose your own tracking tools, perhaps some of my methods will be of use. Since I purchased my first Handspring Visor a few years ago, I have been using it for a variety of data collection tasks. My mileage log is a simple memo pad document where I record the pertinent information. This document can then be imported into a spreadsheet program for further formatting and analysis.

I now use Action Names Datebook by Iambic (*www.iambic.com*) to track all my tasks, appointments and contacts, but the built-in Palm programs would work just as well. Whenever I am walking around a client's site, I enter in each request as a to-do item. The Notes field allows me to record any further information about the task. Then, when I have completed the task, I close the to-do list with any further notes. This creates a trail of my work on this particular task without requiring me to jump through hoops. This information is then transferred to Now Up-to-Date & Contact (an organization program, (*www.powveron software.com/products/nudc/tour*) on my Macintosh, where I can easily sort it and generate a detailed report for my client.

Capturing the data as I go prevents me from procrasti-nating and then trying to "catch up" on my tracking weeks or months later. Not only does it make it less onerous, but it also improves the quality of the data gathered.

Each day, it becomes more and more important to be able to justify your existence to your employers. This is especially true in a high-tech career, where your managers may not fully understand exactly what you do. Regardless of how you do it, track your work as closely as you can, and you will be rewarded the next time someone asks you, "Just what do you do here?"	❏