

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Technology, Not Computers

By Douglas E. Welch

Embroiled in your high-tech career, faced with a litany of one computer problem after another, you might begin to think that computers are what it is all about. Unfortunately, computers are only a small part of your problem. The bigger problem is an overall lack of understanding about *all* technology, not just computers.

Technology has seeped into nearly every aspect of life, from the electric/sonic/pulsating toothbrush in the morning to the microchip-controlled electric blanket at night. If you want to build your high-tech career to greater and greater heights, you would do well to teach *technology* to your clients, not just computers.

Getting Inside

During my 16-plus years of working in high tech, I have found one thing to be true, again and again. When I can teach people why something works, as well as how to make it work, we all benefit. If I can teach someone the underpinnings of a system, then she has the tools to increase her own skills. Proving the cliché true, if I give them a fish, they eat for a day. If I teach them to fish, they eat for a lifetime.

If I give clients step-by-step instructions on how to perform a particular task, they will never move beyond that structure. They will never investigate what happens if they press this key instead of that. They will never try new methods, even when the instructions no longer fit their needs. They will continue to plod along, following their dog-eared notes, until the instructions stop working. Only then will they call you to fix it. Even then, they will often be confused if your solution contains different steps from the original.

When you work with your clients, you need to help them get inside their systems. You need to show the user why it works the way it does, as well as how. I actually discourage note-taking when I am working with my clients. For one, it slows down and interrupts the learning process. Second, it restricts the client's understanding of the whole.

Once they start writing down step-by-step instructions,

it will be very difficult to alter their thinking. Most clients can deal with this, although there are a few who simply *must* write things down. We all learn in different ways, so I don't pressure these people. I do understand, though, that they will never develop an understanding of the whole. In effect, they have limited themselves to the most basic understanding of technology, never to roam outside that carefully established range.

Teach Them How to Learn

A common practice among teachers of all levels is to provide their students with the tools necessary to learn, as well as teaching them fact and figures. Teaching children how to use the library opens up a world of wonder to them. They can be self-generating and expand their learning on their own. What bigger gift can we offer to people than the ability to be self-educating? I believe the same rule applies to learning about technology.

Whether you are talking about a complex computer system or a bedside alarm clock, you should never stop trying to give your clients the big picture. As with any learning, one concept builds off another. I regularly use the analogy of a desktop and a file cabinet to explain the difference between RAM and hard disk space. In fact, I have a whole litany of "real-world" analogies that I use on a daily basis.

I have found that tying technological concepts back to real-world examples is the best way to set it in the client's mind. Better still, it is generic, so clients can see that the same general concept also applies to their handheld computers, DVDs, televisions, microwaves, and a host of other technology that surrounds them. Giving your clients a basic understanding of inputs and outputs can give them the freedom to disassemble and move their VCR across the room without having to call the cable company.

In fact, freedom is exactly what you are giving to your clients. When you give them a way to understand technology, a way to "get inside the box," you are giving them the freedom to learn and grow on their own. When you do this, you have truly become a teacher in the best sense of the word. □

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