

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Fear Factor

By Douglas E. Welch

Every day of your high-tech career, unless you are hopelessly embedded in a never-varying position, there will be a certain amount of fear involved. While it may not be as frightening as some of the other fears in your life, there can be the fear of failure—fear of losing your job, your livelihood, and your career. Sometimes, fear such as this can be even more oppressive, as there is no definite end to the pressure. It simply ebbs and flows from day to day and week to week.

Living With Career Fear

Even after 20 years of working in high tech, I still enter every appointment with a bit of trepidation. Will I be up to today's challenge? Do I know what I need to know? Will this be a day when the technology wins? Some days are worse than others, especially after a difficult call. Still, in the end, I have to remind myself constantly that I have the tools I need to do the job.

The first and most important thing to remember is it is not brain surgery. No one is going to die. Life may not be easy, data may be destroyed, but you will not be responsible for someone's death. Face it: Losing your job is trivial compared to that.

Sometimes, even when you try to do your best, there will be times when the combination of bad hardware, software, planning or more will combine into unsolvable problems—mountains that can only be gone around, not over or through. It can be frightening, discouraging, even angering when this happens, but solutions will be found.

Sometimes clients can be quite unforgiving of these failures, but if you are like me, your own recriminations and blame are far more damaging. Kicking yourself over mistakes made and opportunities missed causes only more, and tougher, troubles down the road.

Getting Back on the Horse

Unless you suddenly decide to change your career, you'll still have to face the next call, the next project. There is nothing to do but start. Of course, you'll already be smarter than you were before. You did learn something from your failure, right? Even if you learned only what you didn't know, you learned something.

If you can, start with a small task that has a good

chance of success. Completing such a task lets you know that everything has not gone to pot, just one specific item.

If you're in the midst of a large project, find one small, particular task to complete within the bigger project. The results are the same. You continue on your work while regaining some small degree of confidence.

Fighting Fear

There are several things I do to try to keep my ever-present "worrier" in check when I am working.

First, do no harm.

It is always my most basic goal to leave no client worse off than when I arrived. Even if I can't solve a problem entirely, the client should still remain somewhat productive. By always working with this in mind, I can control my worries, even if I need to do more research before I can solve the problem entirely. Leaving a client with a nonfunctioning computer dramatically increases the sense of failure and can cloud your thinking during the call.

Over-Prepare

If I am going to be without Internet access at a client site, over-preparing might involve printing up helpful tech notes or other files to bring with me. Of course, having access to the Internet simply makes your life easier. Working on your own is much less stressful when you know you have thousands of people to turn to for help at the touch of a mouse.

I have developed a series of friends over the years who can help me out when I am stumped, or merely offer a consensus opinion that I am on the right track. I also try to keep the latest software tools in my bag, including antivirus programs, disk repair software and more.

Doubt Breeds Fear

Facing the daily tasks of a complex high-tech career is enough to make anyone doubt their abilities, and doubt breeds fear. Trying to manage all the permutations of hardware, software and people can seem impossible on even the best days. Yet you can, and must, face your fears if you hope to have a successful high-tech career. In fact, how you deal with your fears can be one of the most important factors in defining your future success. □

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.