

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Making the Handoff

By Douglas E. Welch

Like movies, television and theater, working in high tech is a collaboration between a wide variety of people. Even if you work for yourself, you have to deal with the needs of clients, the limitations of software and hardware manufacturers, and a host of other people. When collaborating with others, one of the most important skills to master is the handoff.

The Handoff

It may seem absurd even to think about it, but there is a proper way to hand something to another person. This was one of the first things I learned from a great technical theater teacher in college. When building stage sets with construction tools, first you extend the item to the other person and say, “Get it?” The other person replies, “Got it,” and grips the tool in their hand. Then you reply “Good,” once the transfer is complete. This ensures that both parties are aware of what is happening, and helps to prevent dangerous injuries, especially when you are on a ladder 30 feet in the air. You don’t want to drop a 20-pound spotlight on someone’s head.

You would be well advised to adopt this handoff procedure in everything you do. While the consequences of a missed handoff might not be life threatening, they can certainly be career threatening.

Get It?

So, how and when do you apply the handoff rule? To be as effective as possible, every item, every task, every request you hand off to someone else has to be tracked somewhere. If you ask someone, whether a coworker or an employee, to do something, you need to note that request in *your* to-do list. This is the “Get it?” phase. You are making a formal request and are waiting for confirmation from the other person.

It doesn’t matter how this request is recorded—on a Palm handheld or in a notebook—but it has to be tracked. This is what will allow you to maintain control over your commitments down the road. Using whatever technology you choose, you need to set a day and time to follow up on the request. Tracking the commitments that you ask of others, and those asked of you, is the surest

way to increase your productivity and effectiveness.

Got It

The next step in the handoff ensures that both parties understand the commitment they’re making. The “Got it” phase will usually involve some clarification of the request. What, precisely, are you asking for? When do you need it? Are there possible alternatives? Do we have everything we need? Taking a few moments to ask these questions up front can prevent hours of headaches down the road. I’m sure most of you have started on a project only to find that the task wasn’t defined clearly enough. Make sure you really “Get it” before committing to the task.

Good!

The final step in the handoff is making sure the task was completed. If you aren’t tracking your commitments, how will you know which are running behind, which are completed and which are hopelessly in trouble?

Every day you need to check your list of commitments and follow up on each one. In most cases, each original handoff will require several more before any project is complete. Was the network server installed yesterday? If not, why not? What needs to be done to make it happen? Do you need to add another person to the project? If so, you have yet another handoff to start and manage.

The process never stops. Old commitments are being completed, but many more are being made every single day. In fact, this constant motion of one handoff after another directly reflects your overall productivity. If you aren’t constantly collaborating with those around you, something is not getting done.

The next time you are working with a coworker, consultant or client, think about the three steps of the handoff. Make sure you are “getting” the right thing. Make sure they have “got” what you really need and, most importantly, make sure everyone arrives at “good” together. Whether you are trying to complete a project large or small, your high-tech career will depend on making sure that no one drops the project “hammer” on anyone else’s head. □

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