CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Back to School

By Douglas E. Welch

I get many questions from readers regarding how they should continue their education as a way to begin or further their high-tech careers. Most often, their questions are about which technical school or technical training to pursue, and where. It may seem counterintuitive, but my usual recommendation doesn't involve further technical training, but rather the pursuit of traditional educational outlets like bachelor's, master's and Ph.D. programs.

More to the World

My main emphasis in recommending traditional education programs is this: Studying history, mathematics, science, and other basic concepts assists you in learning more about the world. The more you understand how the world operates, the more you will understand how technology fits into the world as a whole. If you are already in a high-tech career, it's likely that you have taught yourself much of the technology you need to understand. There is no reason you shouldn't be able to expand your knowledge to other systems on your own.

On the other hand, developing a grounding in history and science is often best developed using traditional methods. This isn't to say you can't teach yourself, though. Even when immersed in a degree program, you can and should continue to explore interesting topics on your own. The classroom is sure to introduce you to concepts and areas of study that you might never have considered.

The simple truth is, there is more to the world than technology. Even a confirmed techno-geek like myself has come to realize that. I have interests far outside the technological realm, and I have found that these diverse interests can teach me something about technology, no matter how different they might seem.

Cross-Pollination

It is this cross-pollination of ideas between the common world and technology that can help to expand your education far beyond specific technology classes. You might not believe it, but learning about Babylonian history can lead you to a better understanding of computer networking and how people work together in groups. Studying cellular biology can lead you to new and innovative ways of writing computer programs. Sometimes the best way to learn more about technology is to learn about something entirely different.

Too often, we high-tech workers immerse ourselves so deeply in technology that we start to lose any sense of perspective. We can forget that technology should be used to better people's lives, not simply as an exercise in itself. There is always a human component to technology, and learning about the rest of the world can be a great way of reminding ourselves of this fact.

The cross-pollination can also lead you to a new high-tech career, one that encompasses both your technological skills and an interest in other areas. You may find that geology holds a special interest in your life. Why not develop a career that makes use of this combination of interest and skill? Perhaps you can develop new programs for analyzing geologic strata and unlocking the secrets of the Earth. Go ahead—dream a little. You just might find a better, more customized career.

Degrees

Another benefit of more traditional continuing education is that it usually results in a degree that anyone can understand. While holding a bachelor's or master's degree, or a Ph.D., doesn't tell the whole story about your intelligence or skills, it gives people an understanding of your educational background. While an MSCE or CNE might hold some weight in high-tech environments, it doesn't mean much to your average person.

People simply have a better understanding of the work involved in obtaining a BS or MS degree. This can be a big advantage when you are looking for a position in companies that are behind the technology curve. Traditional degrees can open up doors that would have remained closed to those holding only technology certifications.

If you are considering continuing your education, you would be well advised to look into traditional degree programs as well as technical certification classes. College classes, in any discipline, can help you to expand your thinking and your understanding of the world. Any education discipline will increase your understanding of technology in ways you might never have imagined. Just because you have a high-tech career doesn't mean that you can't benefit from a non-technology education. ❑

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■ **TECHNICAL ADVISOR AND ASSISTANT**—Program Manager developing Web-based financial management system for federally funded law enforcement program requires technical advisor and assistant. Candidate must possess high-level applications design and development skills, with experience in Web technologies, and database design/use. Candidate will report directly to Program Manager based in downtown San Diego. MS Office and strong writing and organizational skills are a must. Full-time commitment for 12-week period starting early July, 2003. E-mail resume to *andradem@swb.hidta.org*.