

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

The Grand Tour

By Douglas E. Welch

It is a simple truth that people in high-tech careers often spend entirely too much time staring at their computer screens, when, in fact, they should be dealing with the people using computers. It is all too easy to lose yourself in the minutiae of programming, debugging the Excel spreadsheet or tweaking that PowerPoint presentation. If you really want to make a difference in your company and your career, you need to take the Grand Tour on a regular basis.

Get Up, Get Out, Get On With It

If you aren't spending a few hours each week checking up on your clients (or users or customers), then you are in danger of forgetting the reason behind your job. No matter what you do in high-tech, in some way you are supporting the productivity of other people. They rely on you to keep their systems operating so that they can do their job. Too often, though, you can become so immersed in your own worries that you forget the true purpose of your job.

If you think you are falling victim to this lack of perspective, take some time—right after reading this column, if possible—and go talk to some of those people you support. In some cases, you might actually be supporting end users and their computer systems. In others, you might be facilitating program development or accounting for a host of other high-tech systems.

Ask them how they are doing. Ask them how their computers are working. Ask them anything. More than likely, the conversation will come around to some issues they are having with their systems. You can also ask direct questions about newly installed equipment or systems just to confirm that everything is working. More importantly, listen. Be eager, open and attentive in your listening. Listen for the half-truths and little white lies that people sometimes tell to avoid the hard truth.

This is not the time to be defensive, though. If someone criticizes one of your systems, listen to their complaints and ask questions to make sure you understand their problem exactly. No matter what the problem, it is always better to hear about it before it gets escalated to your supervisor, manager or VP.

Write down comments and complaints. This shows that you are paying attention to their problem and are taking some action. Let the user know that you will get

back to them with an update by the next day. You don't have to promise that the problem will be fixed, only that it has been heard and someone has given it some attention.

Once you have talked to the first person, repeat as necessary. Talk to everyone—line workers, junior and senior management and executives. Only in this way will you get a true overview of how you are doing. Relying too heavily on any one sector can give you a false reading on your progress. Executives might love a system because it gives them the statistics they need, but end users may feel that the burden of using the system is falling entirely on their shoulders. Everyone should get a say.

The Virtual Tour

I understand that, in some cases, you may not be able to talk to your users directly. Perhaps they are located in a different building or in a completely different city. Maybe you staff a telephone customer service center. Even so, you can still take a virtual tour of your office. Make a point of reviewing call logs, trouble tickets, problem reports or whatever other correspondence you have with your users. Oftentimes, this will point out a problem or a trend that needs some attention.

Call your customers directly, much as you would drop by their office if it were nearby. Let them know you are interested in hearing what they have to say. Send out regular e-mails asking for comments and complaints, or offering new tips for certain programs. I know that whenever I send out my monthly newsletter to my clients it always triggers two to three calls or e-mails. These users had an issue, but needed a reminder to contact me.

Sometimes listening to your users can be difficult, especially if you are in the midst of a major project. That said, it is also one of the most important things you can do. Taking the Grand Tour gives you an opportunity to head off problems at the pass, while also developing ideas for new projects and solutions. Don't shortchange yourself or your customers. Get out of your office and let them know you are listening.

Book of the Week: Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, by J.K. Rowling. (After all, you can't read business books all the time, can you?) □

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