

eSubnet Fragment Article

Living With the Enemy

As IT professionals, we share a common problem – our end-users. We marvel, joke and fret about them, as to how some of them are able to perform their job when they can't seem to perform the most basic computer tasks. And yet, this is not their fault.

Here are a few things to keep in mind.

Not everyone can 'do' IT.

We have all met people in the industry who shouldn't be in it. IT requires a certain type of thinking, and it requires a desire to be good at IT. This is true in any industry. For example, consider the restaurant industry. I can cook an egg rather nicely. But this doesn't make me a chef. Chefs are specialists, with a passion for cooking, and experience working within the restaurant industry. Everyone has a passion, what they do best, whether it's cooking, communicating, organizing teams, or configuring servers. Those with a passion for IT do much better working as an IT professional, and those without that passion often seek our help. Keep this in mind when you show your end-user how to do that simple IT task for the third time. Remember the task is simple to you because IT is your passion, not his or hers.

Most companies don't focus on IT--and neither do their staff.

Corporations operate in various ways, focusing their expertise on their own products or services. When hiring employees, they look at appropriate talent and passion, and for experience and social fit to suit their business unit and industry. They don't only hire computer savvy people. They select for the main skills that the job will require, and often leave out IT skills. In other words, when they aren't filling IT positions, they don't usually test for IT competence or passion. So don't expect end-users to have these.

Environments change.

Just when you thought you'd taught an end-user how to create a mail-merge, MS-Word 2008 comes out with a new interface with ribbons. The end-user needs to relearn how to do their work. There have been new versions of MS-Word for Windows almost every year since 1989. And through these version changes we have seen many features come and go, and in this case, an entire new way to interface with known features. There's a steep learning curve even for the computer savvy end-user. Be patient.

Consider these issues that the technologically challenged end-users deal with the next time you feel your blood pressure rising.

Is this it then?

Even while you keep these things in mind, know that you are not consigned to a life repeating the same tasks over and over. End-users can be taught.

Training

There are many forms of training: end-users are sent on courses; a trainer visits to deliver training to a small group; supplying reading material or access to online demos or courses. Training allows those with great job skills to raise their computer skills to a level which not only facilitates their work but enhances it. Third-party trainers are seen as coming in to 'help' and so the process goes smoothly. Of course, you can provide training, although I don't recommend this. Unfortunately, in-house IT staff are often seen as the enemy, working between management and end-users, between two masters, and aren't as readily accepted as a third-party trainer.

The alternative is to hire people who have already received the appropriate training. Test them as part of the hiring process. You should get a good idea of their competency levels with well-designed tests. Create the test to cover something complicated enough to demonstrate advanced skills such as mail-merges or using pivot-tables. Alternately you could provide a multiple choice test, such as:

- 1) The Help function in MS-Office is available by pressing which key?
A: F5 B: F3 C: F1 D: F11
- 2) The contents of the paste buffer can be placed into a document with which key combination?
A: Alt-P B: Alt-V C: Ctrl-V D: Ctrl-P

I feel that the first question should be mandatory.

Conclusion

The cost of an employee goes beyond salary. It includes their office furniture, a computer, business cards, and the costs involved in supporting them, including their use of technology and running a helpdesk.

This might seem to be a short lived problem. As the current generation of techno-savvy youngsters raised on video games and the internet move in and up, this problem should go away. But it may not be that simple. While it is true that many youth today are more computer savvy, computers become ever more complex to use, and these youngsters still need to acquire related business technology skills.

I've worked helpdesk support, and I've managed helpdesk staff, and seen the problems that people have. I can't stress enough how far a little training will go to improve your employees' responsiveness and productivity. In short, training can improve your company's bottom line.

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