

## Pro-bono Tech Support - Give Your Relatives a Break

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Do you ever get frustrated with your relatives lack of technical knowledge? I see my skills and my company as fulfilling a very specific need and providing valuable services - particularly to business. But to my relatives I just "...work with computers". You know what I mean right? You might be a fabulous OO programmer, or an awesome Flash designer or an unparalleled network engineer, but your job is usually described like this:

"Have you met my son Bob, he works with computers."

"Mabel's youngest, Sally... she does something or other with computers"

"George is a good friend of mine - he works *in* computers." (like there's a giant computer somewhere full of laborers)

To the rest of the world, what we do is somehow tied to their aging Windows 95 desktop computer where they email each other and send the latest Internet joke around. To most of my relatives, the guy at the end of the tech support line helping them get the video resolution set on their new Dell PC is no different from me. They imagine me in a sweat shop with computer parts strewn around "making things work". How do I know? Who do you think they call when their PC won't boot or their monitor is fuzzy? Did you ever get this call? "Mark, my printer is not working, do you know what is wrong?".

Those support calls make you angry - right? Stop a moment and think of a Doctor getting this call, "Doc, my leg hurts, do you know what's wrong?". The doctor might chuckle, but he or she not likely to be angry. The Doctor doesn't expect his patient to know the ins and outs of diagnosing leg pain. The doctor also isn't likely to get bent out of shape if she's a dermatologists and she has just been asked a question about orthopedics. Doctor's are more likely to react with patience and to *appreciate the trust* that is given by the patient. Why is that? What can we learn from this example? Why do I.T. professionals have so much emotionally invested in how others treat their profession?

### Passion and Technology

One thing I've noticed is that technology has some of the trappings of faith for folks truly immersed in it. There's a certain passion we feel for technology that goes beyond utilitarianism. We invest time and (yes it's true) emotion in our technology. We rave about our laptop, treo or new version of software. Sometimes at night, when I've been working on a sticky problem, I actually dream in code. In case you doubt this passion, think about how incredibly *defensive* developers get when discussing their preferred approach or technology. Flame wars about Linux vs. Windows, Java vs. .NET or Photoshop vs. ... vs... (what IS the main competitor?) show how deeply we commit ourselves to our chosen approach. It stands to reason with so much invested in this area of our life that we rankle when others treat it so carelessly.

In fact there's a whole lifestyle with technology at the center. I call it the TC lifestyle (Tech-Centered). Some things about the TC lifestyle are actually really good things. People make lasting friendships and connections and they see themselves as involved in a vibrant community. There are many pitfalls however. I'll write another blog about it

later in the week, but for now here are a couple of signs that you are a TE convert:

1. You feel a sense of urgency about your connection points (cell phone, email, IM) and you feel lost or disconnected without them.
2. You feel a sense of closeness to folks you have never seen face to face, but know only through your online interactions.
3. The *margin* of your life is technology focused (you use the Internet for liesure activities as well as work and communication)
4. Your financial decisions skew toward technology.

... there are many more signs. I'm still fleshing out this idea.

For now, regarding your relatives, I'd just like to say - *lighten up*. Be thankful for the technology gap. If everyone knew how to do what you do - you'd be flipping burgers. Don't be impatient with people who ask for your help. Try to see it as giving back some of the gifts that God has given you. Don't look down on people that aren't knowledgeable about technology. There are many things in life that you *don't* know. Thousands of people live happy and fulfilled lives without the help of the latest gadget. There are even people (yes in the U.S.) who don't have and (shockingly) don't want a computer! The hallmark of a truly admirable person is a willingness to learn and grow, and an unwillingness to "lord it over" others, even when they have the power to do so.

Choose to show grace and patience. When that other person says "I'm so stupid" or "I can't do this", contradict them. Remind them of the things that they do that are beyond *your* skill and knowledge. Put them at ease by keeping them on the same level as you. Don't fall into the trap of petty superiority. Remember, it's not the depth of our knowledge that defines the quality of our life. It is the depth and quality of our relationships with others. Plus, chances are if you help out your father-in-law with his PC, he'll help you rebuild your deck :)