

President's Corner

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"The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate."

I love this quote. It is so indicative of our society today. The best thing about this quote is that it is attributed to a gentleman by the name of Joseph Priestly, who died in 1804. He missed the invention of most of the technologies we typically associate with communications: telegraph - 1832, telephone - 1876, photograph - 1926, radio - 1888, television - 1920s, computers - 1940s and our favourite, the World Wide Web (and consequently, email) - 1991. What we modern techno-geeks tend to forget is the invention that revolutionized communications and moved us from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age – the Gutenberg Printing Press in 1454. Basic math tells you we have had over 500 years to learn how to communicate effectively. So what is the problem?

Could it be that we tend to take communication for granted? After all, doesn't it come naturally? We start communicating the day we are born – so why work at it? Watch how quickly a mother jumps at the first peep from her newborn. When we were babies, with a well-timed smile and gurgle, the world was ours. If only now our efforts would get these quick results! (I don't recommend gurgling at your next performance review or at the boardroom table.)

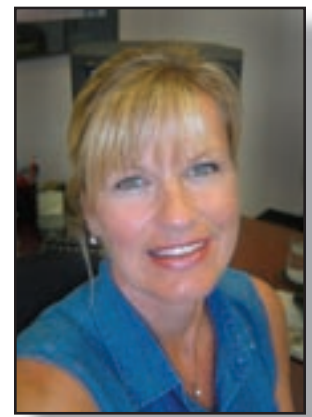
Look through any employment opportunity and you will quickly recognize its importance – "Ability to communicate effectively, both written & oral" is one of the most commonly listed requirements for all types of positions. Unfortunately, I.T. professionals are traditionally not known for their ability to communicate effectively. Part of the problem is we are not taught the importance of effective communication from an early age. Kids get passed from one grade to the next without being able to write a proper sentence or paragraph. The results of this show up every year with the incoming class at any university.

I.T. professionals face additional impediments to effective communication - namely USERS. Try to determine exactly what a user wants. Face it, we speak a different language. Have you ever developed a system for a group of users that was exactly what they had asked for? The basic truth is (and we all know it) – what they **think** they want, is not what we **know** they want. But when we try to explain this to them, we come across as condescending and patronizing. When we try to explain technical details in simpler terms, we're accused of "talking down" to people. During one of my earlier experiences on the help desk, a user called to say her computer would not turn on. The first question I asked was "Is it plugged in?" To say I got an earful is an understatement. I now know better and prefix this question with "I know this is a really stupid question, but humour me..." (As it turned out, she had inadvertently kicked out the power cord.)

As far as effective written communication, one of the biggest culprits is email. As email quickly becomes the chosen means to communicate, we are developing into a generation of "quick bite" communicators – using short, abbreviated nuggets of information, written in a casual, haphazard manner to get our message across. And not just one of these little messages, but hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them. As senders, we don't take the time to properly express our thoughts and as recipients, we certainly don't take the time to read them.

As a side note, the Gartner Group states that the average employee will spend 49 minutes a day managing email. If that doesn't scare you, grab your calculator and take a mid-size office of 100 people, each spending 49 minutes a day.

This adds up to 83 hours per day; 415 hours per week; 20,750 hours per year! No wonder we are not communicating – we are too busy with the delete key!



Eveline Gaede

So what is the solution? The first step is to recognize that communication – of any kind – cannot be taken for granted. A couple of years ago, we had a very bright and dedicated programming co-op student in our department. Her analytical and programming skills were far above that of a typical college student. I was amazed at how well she communicated, since she was a recent immigrant to Canada (about 3 years.) Part of her job was to answer the help desk calls and document the issues. About one third of the way into the term, she came into my office in tears. We had recently hired another team member, and when she saw how quickly he got to the root of problems, she realized how her ability to communicate was affecting her job and could possibly affect her future job opportunities. She definitely grasped the full importance of effective communication. In her case, I am completely confident that this was a temporary roadblock, considering the strides she had made in the short time she has been in Canada. By realizing that she had a communication problem, she had already taken the first step.

The second step is to always be cognizant of not only what you are trying to communicate, but also the means you are using to do it. Today companies recognize the fact that I.T. must be involved at a business level in the strategic planning for a company. The future is all about developing close communication links with our customers, employees and suppliers. All this boils down to the fact that we must learn how to communicate effectively – clearly, concisely and in business terms, not techie talk – a hard thing for us techno-geeks to do! 