

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Going With the Flow

By Douglas E. Welch

As much as you and your clients might dislike the fact, computers do not last forever. Even the fastest system will seem slow after a few years of operating system upgrades and growing software requirements. It is in your best interest, and that of your client's, to ensure that the computer systems under your care are keeping up with users' needs, while still watching the bottom line. Learning to balance computer needs against financial concerns is an important part of any high-tech career.

When to Upgrade

Sometimes it is clear when you need to upgrade a user's system. Perhaps they recently started using Adobe Photoshop on a regular basis. Maybe they have started developing Web pages or large documents. It only makes sense to monitor the work that is happening so that you can start the upgrade process as soon as possible. It is already too late if the user has started appearing at your door every day, complaining about the speed of their computer. Procuring a new system can take weeks, and that means you are going to have to face that user every day until something is done.

Beyond the basic maintenance and troubleshooting of computer systems, you should also be aware of how the systems are being used. Are presentations the order of the day, and Powerpoint standard-issue software for everyone? Have users' e-mail needs bloomed dramatically? Are audio and video editing creeping into everyday use? As you make your rounds, take a few minutes to notice how the computer environment may be changing.

Being aware of your environment is especially important if you plan on migrating older systems down through various levels of workers before you retire them. For example, a system might be fine for basic word processing or other regular tasks, but can't handle the applications needed by a particular employee. That machine should be moved into a position where it can still be useful, but not negatively impact productivity. Of course, this increases the complexity of your job, as you have to not only install a new system, but also prepare the old system for its new task. You can add one more level of work if you are also moving the second system to a different

employee or dedicated task.

As you can see, such complicated moves require as much lead time as possible in order to ensure that everyone gets the system they need in a timely manner. In most cases, being aware of your environment grants you the necessary time to keep an office working well.

Issues

In some cases, you can stretch the life of an existing system without replacing it entirely. If a system has sufficient processor speed, the addition of memory or hard drive space could extend its life for a few more months. In my experience, though, if the processor speed is significantly lower than current machines, the addition of memory will not help you much.

You have probably already faced a situation such as this: A high-level executive has decided that he or she needs the latest, greatest computer system, with all the bells and whistles, even though they generally only check e-mail and browse the Web. If you are like me, you cringe at such situations since you probably know many people who could make better use of the machine. That said, you can at least plan for the eventual replacement of that machine so that it can be reassigned to a more productive area.

Another way to combat problems like this is to develop systems that carry a bit of flash while not breaking the department budget. In the Macintosh world, an executive user might be more than satisfied with the cool new iMac LCD instead of requiring a PowerMac G4 tower with Cinema display. If you have some options for the user, you might be able to get the G4 into the hands of someone who can make better use of its power. While not an ideal situation, it can provide some flexibility in a no-win situation.

The next time you are looking at a listing of your computer inventory (You do have one, don't you?), take the time to see where systems could be added, shifted or upgraded to better serve your users' productivity. Keeping users happy and productive is yet one more way to enhance your job and your high-tech career. □

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