

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Mac in a PC World

By Douglas E. Welch

Hi, my name is Douglas and . . . I'm a Mac user. It isn't just a fling, either. I have several Macs, and one is even running (gasp) OS X. If you were to ask my clients, though, many would have no idea that I am a Mac user. More important, this is exactly the way I want it. If they saw me as only a "Mac person," they might question my ability to solve their Windows problems. A successful high-tech career depends on being flexible and having the ability to deal with as many different computers and operating systems as possible.

A Silly Fight

Years ago, during the height of the Mac/PC war, I quickly realized how much time and energy was being wasted on this rivalry, so when asked my computer preference, I merely said, "Whatever works best for you."

Even today, though, with the obvious dominance of MS Windows, people still seem to love to fight this battle. The fact is, most of my consulting and troubleshooting work involves Windows PCs. I know just as much about them as I do about the Mac. I find both operating systems equally useful. I just personally like the Mac.

Being knowledgeable in both platforms has helped my career extensively over the years. Since I don't walk about proclaiming my computer preference (and don't have an Apple sticker on my car), each of my clients can see me in a different way. My Windows clients see me as a Windows expert. My Mac clients see me as a Mac guru. All that matters to them is that their problems get solved, not which company has the best software.

While I spend much of my time working with Windows PCs, a significant amount of billable hours comes from Macintosh work. I have one large office client that uses exclusively Macs, as well as several individual clients. If I focused only on Windows, I would be missing out on a substantial amount of money. That certainly isn't wise, especially in today's high-tech climate.

If you don't know something about Windows, Macintosh and UNIX computers, you should start learning today. You never know when you will have to integrate different systems, or support the one or two other types of computers that always seem to creep into an office—even if the company has a stated preference for Windows. You don't have to know everything about all three systems, but knowing a lot about one, and a little about the others, is a sure way to build your career.

Switchers

Over the last several months, I have had at least three "switchers." These are users moving from Windows to Mac or, less frequently, Mac to Windows. Whether these changes had anything to do with Apple's ad campaign or not, I approach all of these people in the same way. If they are thinking of switching to a Mac, they need to be reasonably sure that they will be able to work in the new environment without an overload of confusion.

I instructed all of these clients first to learn as much about the Mac as possible before they bought. They visited their local Apple Store, played with OS X, used the Finder, and fiddled with the Mac versions of software they might already be using. The most important goal was to see if they could quickly understand the Mac metaphor after years of Windows use.

Once they crossed that hurdle, we began discussing their work. Did they regularly have to share files with Windows users? Did they have to use specific VPN software to connect to their corporate networks? Was there Windows-specific software they had to use? Any of these questions could have raised a sticking point.

Even if they could duplicate the functionality of their Windows machine, I wanted them to understand that they would have to adapt to different procedures, and sometimes remember to process files in a particular way to ensure that Windows users could read their files. These are the types of decisions they need to make *before* they purchase the machine. Otherwise, they could be in for some very nasty surprises.

Regardless of whether or not the Macintosh is your primary computing platform, Mac knowledge increases your value to your clients and allows you to expand your client base. Even Windows-centric companies need to communicate with Macs on occasion. If you haven't expanded your skills to include the Macintosh (and some UNIX) knowledge, you are doing a disservice to your clients, yourself and your high-tech career. □

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