

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Everyone Needs a Computer Coach

By Douglas E. Welch

When I first saw the theme for this week's issue, I was taken aback. Who needs computer techs? Everyone needs computer techs, or as I call myself, a computer coach. I know the theme is meant to depict a user's feeling of self-sufficiency when using a computer. In fact, this is something that I try to instill in my clients.

That said, there are times when nearly everyone could use a computer coach. The trick is knowing when they need one, and what services a coach can provide.

On Their Own

I have no desire to make my clients dependent on me for every single answer to every single question about their computers. I want them to learn during our relationship so that they can feel more and more empowered when using their computers. I am happiest when my clients show me work that they have completed, or nearly completed, on their own, taking their skills and using them to their limits. You, too, should take this as a compliment, as well. If you have done your job correctly, your client's skills should grow dramatically over time.

Beyond developing actual computer skills, though, you need to instill in your clients a sense for when they need help. Some of my most difficult appointments have been after someone has gone too far, too fast, without enough guidance. It is often a wrenching process to get them back on track, whether this means recovering data or simply backtracking their process to a point where you can begin to move forward again.

Backtracking, especially, has a bad effect on clients. You often find yourself undoing hours of their work, or causing them to start over again from the beginning. If the client knows to call you before she starts a project, or when she realizes that she has reached the limits of her knowledge, much stress could be avoided.

Your clients shouldn't need to call you for every problem, but they should know when to call you. Anything you can do to instill this knowledge of when to call will benefit your client and your career.

When to Call

There are a few guidelines that you can try to pass on to your clients to help them down the road of computer self-sufficiency. You may never reach every client, but neither will you "coach" yourself out of a job. When a client learns something from you, it only makes him want to learn more.

The Five-Minute Rule

When I start working with clients, I teach them the five-

minute rule. If they can't find an answer to the problem in five minutes using the built-in help or printed manuals, they should contact me. Too often, I get phone calls from people who are at their wits' end and completely frustrated. The five-minute rule helps to curb as many of these calls as possible.

Before You Start

I also try to educate my clients to call me *before* they start a major, time-consuming project that may be outside their skill level. Again, I have often seen clients trying to type a letter in a spreadsheet program or do major calculations in a word processing program. These are extreme examples, but true.

In some cases, the client needs to know some basics of database design before setting up a custom database so that he will be able to search the information in the way he wishes. Regardless of the size of the project, it is always better for the client to call before he starts. In most cases, I will offer advice, free of charge, over the phone. It is worth the investment of a few minutes to save major headaches down the road.

Crashes Are Not Normal

One of the hardest lessons to teach my clients is that they should call if their computer crashes frequently. Regular crashes point out a flaw in hardware or software that needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, many clients have friends or relatives that tell them, "That is just the way that computers are."

You need to combat this belief at the very start. Otherwise, you will be dealing with chronically frustrated clients. Worse still, this frustration will quickly spill over to you personally. Do everything you can to resolve chronic problems, even if it means convincing your client to replace her current system.

Every computer user should be as self-sufficient as possible, and gain as much computer knowledge as their time and energy permit. That said, they should also know when to avail themselves of your assistance. These two traits will lead to a long and healthy relationship with your clients, and a happier and more productive computer career. □

HELP WANTED

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