In the previous three columns, I’ve reported on discussions and correspondence with staff members at Microsoft headquarters about problems I perceived in the Microsoft Office Fluent User Interface, the new style of menus for Office 2007 products.

My initial reactions to the new interface were hostile and contemptuous. I assumed that the designers had ruined a perfectly useful interface with no regard to the retraining costs required to get used to the new system of symbols. I railed against rigid programmers who know better than to let users adapt the interface to their own preferences. Arrogant swine: typical Microsoft!

Now, following an exemplary correspondence from Microsoft expert Mark Alexieff, Senior Product Manager for Microsoft Office, it seems to me that the arrogance lay in my assumptions rather than in Microsoft’s. Contrary to my assumptions, there is evidence that the new user interface is working and users are mostly happy with it.

I do think it might be interesting for Microsoft to do a correlation analysis between the degree of satisfaction in various dimensions and the initial level of competence of the user. In my case, with my obsessive-compulsive personality, I had created highly personalized, ultra-efficient toolbars reflecting my most-frequently used functions and with icons adapted to allow rapid differentiation among similar functions. I still don't understand why the personalized “Quick Access Toolbar” should be restricted to a single row and prevented from relocation. For example, I use a 19 inch vertically oriented screen with more room for the Quick Access Toolbar along one vertical side than across the top of the screen. Perhaps this account of a productive and polite correspondence will stimulate ideas for increased flexibility in the user interface without compromising the benefits described in the research summarized in the preceding articles.

But these picky details are not the main point of today’s article. I was delighted with the depth and promptness of response to my concerns and I thank and congratulate Mr. Alexieff and the Microsoft Office PR representative (who asked to remain unnamed) for their customer orientation and courtesy.

From a more general perspective, Mr Alexieff’s response illustrates some prime principles for all of us involved in managing security services (and support services of all kinds):

- Treat the customer politely
- Take the customer’s question seriously
- Respond directly to the customer’s concerns with factual information where possible.

The interchange also supports my long-held view that politeness _from_ the customer is much more successful than aggression and rudeness in generating positive, supportive responses.

So be NICE!
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