

The Expert in the Next Office

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
Professor of Computer Information Systems
School of Business & Management
Norwich University, Northfield VT

Ah, summertime, when the typing is easy. I'm posting a few of my favourite essays published over the last quarter century. This essay was first published in 1988 (note the reference to Lotus 1-2-3, an early and hugely popular spreadsheet) in the Interact "Office Automation" column and again in 2000 in the Network World Security Strategies column. It remains one of my favourites after all these years – and I believe that the lessons still apply.

"Marcie, can you spare a minute?" Marcie groans inwardly. This is the sixth time this morning someone has come in from a neighbouring office to ask her for "a minute". Each occasion lasted about a quarter of an hour. The questions all concerned LOTUS 1-2-3, on which Marcie is the acknowledged expert.

However, Marcie is actually the Assistant to the Director of Finance, not a Technical Support specialist from the Information Centre in Data Processing. Every time she's interrupted by a call for help from people in Accounting, Shipping, Engineering, and even occasionally from Data Processing, she falls further behind in her assigned work. She likes helping people, but lately she's had to stay late after the nominal end of her work day simply to make up for the time she has used acting as informal technical support to her neighbours.

Marcie may have a bad time of it unless something changes in her organization. She may be fired by her boss because her productivity drops too low according to her job description. She may burn out and quit because of overwork and criticism. Or she may cause resentment among her colleagues and neighbours by declining to help them or by complaining to her own boss and causing a ruckus. Alternatively, she may have a good time and manage to meet all the demands on her quite successfully until the DP department begins to feel threatened and someone either complains to the higher ups or begins spreading nasty comments about poor, helpful Marcie. Being the expert in the next office is tough on the expert.

Looking at this situation from a management point of view, there are problems for the recipients of all this free aid. The longer they can persist in getting apparently free help from their unofficial benefactor, the longer they can avoid letting upper management know they need help with their office automation tools. Then when the bubble bursts and the expert becomes unavailable, managers are confronted with a sudden demand for unplanned resources. In some organizations, unexpected staffing requirements are difficult to satisfy. Managers have a hard time explaining how it is that they were unable to predict the need and budget for it.

TINSTAAFL

Engineers often say, "There is no such thing as a free lunch" (abbreviated TINSTAAFL) to imply that no benefit is without cost.

From a technical support perspective, even the most gifted unofficial expert is necessarily an amateur. True, there are many users whose technical knowledge of their tools exceeds that of their own technical support staff. But professional technical support consists of far more than just technical knowledge. Almost no amateur expert will

- Have colleagues to discuss the problem with on a technical level;
- Have backup personnel so she can provide faster service to requesters;
- Search the appropriate technical manuals with the user experiencing a problem;
- Have access to all the periodical information provided by manufacturers;
- Document the problems carefully so as to avoid having to solve them all over again later;
- Have access to phone in consulting services;
- Determine the cause of the problem and ensure that the problem does not recur; and
- Broadcast information about the problem, its workaround, and its fix to unaffected users who may benefit from the information.

Summary

In conclusion, it is more sensible for employees to help themselves and each other by letting management know they need technical support. When someone asks you for technical help, by all means help them – but let your manager know immediately that there's a support problem. When you have a technical problem yourself, by all means ask your expert neighbour for help if it's a matter of seconds to solve it – but tell your own manager that it was an exceptional case and that you'd much rather have a permanent technical support team to work with.

* * *

M. E. Kabay,<mailto:mekabay@gmail.com> PhD, CISSP-ISSMP, specializes in security and operations management consulting services and teaching. He Professor of Computer Information Systems in the School of Business and Management at Norwich University. Visit his Website for white papers and course materials.<http://www.mekabay.com/>

* * *

Copyright © 1988, 2000, 2012 M. E. Kabay. All rights reserved.