Help! I Have Fallen Into Technology

 THE SCREAM was unmistakable. It reverberated through the halls like no other sound I ever heard. It sent chills down my spine and made the hairs on my neck stand straight up; I recognized it instantly. Without a doubt it finally had happened. Our office had fallen into technology and we couldn't get help!

Throughout my career I have used technology's tools to service my customers. Without the support of others, I never would have realized the benefits of much of the technology I use today. Daily I look to others for education. In our office we have found our Mr. Spock, our Mr. Data.

Where does a producer find support without overstretching the budget or jeopardizing security? Knowing how and where to find the assistance required to keep an agency's computers humming can be a formidable challenge in its own right. Hiring a certified professional computer guru can be prohibitively expensive, particularly in situations where routine servicing and troubleshooting are involved. The trick to keeping the technology budget in check is knowing where to find the solution that will cure a particular problem.

In the beginning, my office, like most that started in the mid 1980s, was able to afford only the support of high school students. In those days the information technology (IT) budget was eaten up by the high cost of hardware and software. In retrospect, I have come to realize that HELP stands for two things: hurried education leads to problems, or better yet, hire educated leaders and problem solvers.

Solutions for Every Budget

Whether the producer requires a comprehensive technological overhaul or simple help with a program installation, he or she should keep in mind that there are many avenues to finding the necessary assistance. The first thing most people do is turn to the telephone book and call various companies in an attempt to find a resolution. While this is the easiest approach, it also usually is the most cost prohibitive. With a little research and due diligence, the producer will be able to put together a list of good potential candidates on whom to call when needed.

High school students still are a wonderful alternative to traditional means, if the agent can find the right one. For 15 hours a week I was able keep a fairly knowledgeable student employed to assist us with our technology. In contrast, a computer servicing company would cost me about the same for two hours of work. While a student may not have the in-depth knowledge for serious problems, the students I have hired have been able to solve 90% of the situations my office encountered. Not only did this arrangement

benefit the students trying to gain experience, it also gave us the support needed to be more productive.

When considering employing a student in this capacity it is important to do some consultation with his or her teachers and parents. It may seem like extra work in the beginning, however, the payoff can be tremendous.

Most problems stem from our lack of understanding of the technology in the first place. An obvious place to find assistance, but one that few people seriously consider, are such stores as Circuit City, Staples, Office Max, or Office Depot. Many of these big super stores are great places to go shopping for help.

In my never-ending search for that perfect little gadget, I have found fairly consistently that there usually was someone on the staff who had a sideline business of tutoring or computer repair. If there was not someone on staff, they always had a recommendation. Most of the time the prices these people charge is well below 50% of what a regular company charges.

Coincidentally, while I was shopping for help at Office Depot, another customer was so helpful that he is now my firm's full-time technology consultant. My wife has nicknamed him "Marty Man"!

Free Help

Another excellent resource now offered by most hardware and software companies are what are known as "knowledge bases." These Internet-based online troubleshooting databases are geared toward known issues with a company's products. They offer an explanation and solution to most problems a user may encounter. Depending on his skill level, the technically savvy producer should be able to resolve most issues with a good description of the problem and a few clicks of the mouse.

One of the most comprehensive online knowledge bases is the one maintained by Microsoft at www.microsoft.com, with information on the Microsoft family of products. Two good alternative Web sites to visit for a broader scope of help are www.planetit.com and www.windrivers.com.

More Help

There comes a time in every person's life when he realizes it is time to do some serious studying. Thanks to today's technology, it is possible to take courses directly over the Internet at such Web sites as www.elementk.com or www.learn.com. With a wide choice of course offerings and titles from A to Z, there are levels for the beginner to the advanced. It is easy to enhance one's knowledge quickly on almost any subject from the comfort of the producer's home or office. The best part is that most of these courses are available for free or a modest fee.

I am a tactile learner and therefore also enjoy interactive courses available on CD. The "show me, let me do it" method can help with even the most complex problems a user may encounter. If after trying a few free courses online the producer still believes he needs some help, purchasing a CD-based course may be a good alternative. LearnKey (www.learnkey.com) offers an excellent CD-based course on Office 2000 in addition to many others.

Even More Help

People often forget that almost all software packages include their own help system. Answers to many of the questions a producer may have in using software are readily available to him. Additionally, most technology related items also offer installation and some support via a toll-free number. The producer should check the documentation that came with the purchase.

Programming the Easy Way

Recently I needed some specialized talent to produce a program. The project called for designing and implementing a database of my clients' information and producing several different reports; simple in theory, yet a little above my abilities. I checked with some people I knew and called on my list of prospective computer guys, but no one could assist me in doing it.

So, I turned my attention to finding someone online. After some research I came across www.ework.com. Here I was able to post a description of what I wanted and have prospective programmers give me a bid. Even though the service charges a fee, I was pleased with the response. Bids came in from all over the world and ranged from $200 on the low end to a high bid of $7,500. A group of programmers in India even sent me a working sample. After a careful review process I settled on a programmer in the mid-western United States. I have been pleased with his work and modest prices, and continue to use him today.

Back to School (Hurried Education Leads to Problems)

Another obvious solution available to the producer is to attend or send those staff members who need a basic understanding of their computer to adult education classes. A few telephone calls to the public school system and local universities should reveal a slew of courses geared to the beginner.

This may take care of some of the producer's problems, however, with most offices waist deep in instruction manuals and educational books on technology, this may not be the best answer. Getting someone motivated to go to an adult education class is even harder than asking people to empty their trashcan everyday. Don't get me wrong, if someone is motivated to attend an adult education class, by all means the producer should have the agency pay that person's way.

As the producer can see, there are many alternative means of obtaining support for technology. Calling in Mr. "A+ certified" computer guy may be overkill for solving simple support problems. A knowledgeable tutor or some simple research may be all that is needed. As with hiring for any position, certain people will fall right in line with the producer's needs and expectations, and some will not. Keep looking, and remember to hire educated leaders and problem solvers.