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Melodee Landis

University of Nebraska at Omaha, mlandis@unomaha.edu

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The New Techie

The times they are a-changing, and techies along with them

By **Melodee Landis**

It's great to be a former English teacher working in the world of technology — although it hasn't always been pretty. When I first started working in technology (in the late 1980s), techies greeted me with wary disdain. I didn't know the lingo, I didn't live to be the first to know about the next hardware release, and my idea of a good time on Saturday night was to spend time with a warm, breathing being, not a keyboard and a screen. Furthermore, I was much too verbal, too in-your-face. I lacked that certain *je ne c'est quoi*, that cool detachment so apparent in most techies with whom I worked at the beginning of this adventure.

That was more than ten years ago. Lately, I see the line between techie and nontechie blurring. It's a shame, really. I had grown so comfortable with my image of myself in this rather hostile environment — a sixties, peace-and-love kind of gal always naming my files after pets, cluttering the desktop, and messing with root passwords. You know the type.

It used to be so simple. You saw basically two kinds of techies — the “systems guys,” who sought a disciplined approach to data management, and the “hackers,” who preferred a kamikaze style of information processing. (Today, the hacker stereotype conjures images of criminals breaking into secure systems and stealing information. Then, it meant something much more benign and creative, even heroic, albeit with a scorn for rules and conventions.) Systems guys and hackers were the yin and yang of the computer world.

Systems Guys

The systems guys made up the first wave of computer gurus (and, in truth, almost all were guys). They learned their trade from technical training programs or management information systems programs. They drew up flowcharts, analyzed systems, managed large amounts of data, wrote “specs,” designed schematics, constructed networks, and performed machine magic with secret languages.

Their domain was the computer netherworld, which only they controlled. They had the power to cripple an organization, or galvanize it, using only a finger. They knew it, too. When asked a question about the network, they would launch into a detailed report on the problem in great detail and delight in the blank looks they elicited. Then they finished by saying, “It's pretty simple, really.”

In the systems guys' world, a well-designed data system was a sacred thing. Those who questioned it were, at best, Unfortunate Unenlightened Ones and, at worst — demons! They had a reason for this, but I forget what it was.

Systems guys prompted the computer nerd stereotype with the taped glasses, pocket protectors, and obnoxious laughs. They knew all of the *Star Trek* episodes by heart and were more concerned with the next issue of their favorite comic book than domestic politics. As they became higher paid, they wore navy blazers and khaki pants, and demanded a highly stable, bureaucratic workplace akin to the stability they perceived in their machines.

These folks were rarely noted for their interpersonal skills. They seemed

to view other people from a rarefied position somewhere in deep space, seeing those different from themselves as “mere humans” who had definite limitations. Machines, on the other hand, could perform unlimited functions. The order, reliability, and aesthetics of good machines and systems proved far superior to the foibles of people. To bridge the gap between the limited abilities of humans and these all-powerful machines, one needs — you guessed it — well-trained, full-time systems guys like themselves.

Hackers

Trouble came when a whole bunch of über-techies wanted to assume a place atop the food chain without subscribing to the holy canon of data integrity. Such anarchists — yep, hackers — were like home-garage mechanics. They learned the systems rarely from manuals, more often from experimentation and each other. They craved the emotional high of a powerful machine responding to their whims. They lived to find the shortest route to ultimate control.

The hacker mission focused more on “rebellious from” than “aspiring to” previously established norms. These guys were cool, machines were cool, and together they could rule the cool world. And if this didn't happen — hey, who cared? Playing with these machines was a gas!

Hackers often seemed easier to approach because they liked to show off how cool they were. They couldn't tell you how to do something; they always had to do it themselves. “Here, I'll show you,” they'd say. Then they'd whip through three or four different

ways to do a task, using keystrokes and the mouse together. While your head swam, they'd push away from the desk with a smirk and say, "It's pretty simple, really."

Hackers wore any form of antisocial garb, often jeans with disrespectful T-shirts that said things like "Byte me!" They boasted old tennis shoes, long hairstyles that looked produced by a kitchen blender, and wire-rimmed glasses. They had no fashion rules as long as whatever they wore was in direct contrast to the navy blazer look. Sound contradictory? You get it now!

A New Breed, or Techie 3.0

While we chuckle at these stereotypes, the real systems guys and hackers accomplished remarkable things. Systems guys created the massive data systems that have become the bedrock of every organization in the country. Hackers invented new, creative, more responsive languages and systems, and wreaked general havoc for the systems guys. Where would we be without them? Don't answer that.

Then I woke up one morning to find the earth had shifted under me. Of late, most of my sessions with techies have been, well — dare I say it? — pleasant. If I'm not careful, I might even find myself laughing with them or, worse yet, letting down my superior academic guard.

It appears that techies aren't just techies any more. Some of the newer technicians appear to have it all. Many are technical crossbreeds with both systems design and hacker abilities. The best of these men and women (and, by the way, more of them *are* women) seem to understand that listening and providing a service are important parts of their job. They even dress well, usually in business casual style — something not too shabby but not too officious, either, from Geoffrey Beene, Land's End, or J. Crew.

The instructional technician in our College of Education walks on water. Not only can he handle all of the hardware and software for all of the college's networks and PCs, he's nice. As if that weren't enough, he's also been a



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teacher in a real, live school. Yes, he even knows the field.

If you look closely, you'll see similar phenomena happening all around you, in many different subject areas. The person with experience and training in both a technical and a nontechnical field wins out over a candidate with just one of the two skill areas. Job descriptions often specify training in technology plus expertise in a specific field. For example, many classical, jazz, and folk musicians seek the expertise of other musicians who know how to use technology to help them be more creative. Geographers want help with geographic imaging; journalists need support for multimedia development. Virtually every field is developing sophisticated, highly specific technical tools that require field professionals who are also knowledgeable about the technology.

This new breed of techie — call them Techies 3.0 — could be the answer to the prayers of us practitioners. Some of us lucky ones who have these superheroes supporting us are experiencing the progress possible given the best of

support. When you can find this combination in one helper, it's truly exciting what you can accomplish.

I'm hoping that it won't be so hard to find this brand of support in the future. The technology is becoming more accessible, and every field has leaders who've worked to keep up with it. With a little encouragement, they can bring their tech skills to a level where they can meet the urgent need for hybrid professionals. On the other hand, some of the techies who stick around long enough often get to know a field as well as the professionals they serve. I'd like to think that a respectful workplace and much higher salaries can go a long way in the competition for these hotties. (Okay, okay, I admit it — my daughter taught me that term.)

Don't get me wrong: I fully recognize that the rest of us need to take more responsibility for the technology that has become integral to our field. We cannot continue to expect technical helpers to come in and do it all for us. In the future, I see the professional positions converging, just like the various types of technology coming together. Soon, the professional staff and support staff may not exist in superordinate-subordinate relationships. Instead, we may see a variety of technical skills mixed in with the more traditional professional abilities to yield a veritable panoply of professionals, some more technical than others. Look out — one morning we may wake up and find that the techies are us!

But for now, in this age of the Techie 3.0, the previous models have been relegated to the scrap heap just like the old computers we've cast off. All we want is a little systems analysis here, a little improvisation there, and a whole lot of wisdom and knowledge to boot. I guess this is where I push back from the desk and say, "It's pretty simple, really." *e*

Melodee Landis (melodee_landis@unomaha.edu) is an assistant professor of teacher education at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.