The New Techie: The Times They Are A-Changing, and Techies Along with Them

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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 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 “rebelling 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
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 sophisticated, highly specific technical tools that require field professionals. We need a variety of technical skills mixed in with the more traditional professional abilities. Look out — one morning we may wake up and find the techies are us!

Yet 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 need for hybrid professionals is 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.)

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.”

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