

## On Taking Our Own Medicine

Last summer I read an inspiring book by Geoffrey Kurland, a pediatric pulmonologist who, at age forty-two, was struck with a serious illness.<sup>1</sup> In this memoir, he vividly describes his diagnosis, operations, and struggle for recovery and the important insights he gained about himself, his patients, and the practice of medicine by receiving, rather than delivering, a wide variety of medications and treatment protocols. Recently I was reminded, in a much less serious way, of how important it is for all of us who are involved in providing IT services to immerse ourselves in the confusing, and sometimes bizarre, environments we create for our constituents. We need to move from the protective shells of our comfortable office and home environments, to distance ourselves from the support provided by excellent IT staff, and to experience firsthand the plight of the lonely and frustrated individuals at the end of an often very slow, and very long, network connection—individuals who have been “done in” once again by the wondrous technology that we frequently proselytize. A few personal vignettes illustrate my point.

### **Printer Software from Hell (or, How I Spent Part of My Vacation)**

My night job is serving as OS X system administrator for my wife’s three-year-old iBook. Last summer, we purchased a new printer-fax-scanner-copier combo to replace the void left when our younger daughter absconded with the old, but reliable, printer from our vacation home. Like a pro, I inserted the CD that came with the new printer system, and much to my wife’s amazement, everything worked

as advertised. Not so this summer, when I arrived with my new laptop running Windows XP. The software installation froze halfway through the process. Waiting until the rest of the family was safely out of the house, I secretly dialed the technical support number listed in the manual.

After being informed that our printer was out of warranty, I purchased a two-year service upgrade and waited patiently while I was connected with a pleasant technician in a galaxy far, far away. I was impressed because it was the Fourth of July holiday. After explaining the problem, I was led through a carefully outlined procedure, which died in the same way as my initial amateur attempt. The uninstall/cleanup procedure was much more complicated and led to several lengthy processing delays. During these pauses, the technician happily worked through several scripted questions, asking about the weather in my galaxy, my family, and my state of mind. During one especially long delay, she asked: “Mr. McCredie, other than your printer, how has your day been going?” Since I eventually had to hang up or miss the holiday cookout, I was issued a case number, instructed to call again at my convenience, and told to “have a nice day.”

The next day I furtively contacted another equally pleasant technician, and I again explained that either the CD was bad or the software was out-of-date. However, his script insisted that we had to uninstall and install again (as if the disk had participated in too much partying the day before). Many minutes later, after the system froze again at the same place, my helper in the far-away land noted that

my state of mind was deteriorating quickly. He agreed, after some prodding, to have a replacement disk sent to me by overnight mail. This time the question “Mr. McCredie, other than your printer, how has your day been going?” brought forth a rather grouchy response. I hung up and waited for the replacement disk, which arrived the next day. Imagine my chagrin, however, when I opened the package to discover that technical support had sent a Version 1.0 software CD to replace my Version 3.3 CD.

Another call to yet another technician would not produce a promise of a new disk until we tried the uninstall/cleanup script once again, to no avail. This helper in the far-away land seemed surprised that Version 1.0 worked no better than Version 3.3. By now, I could take no more long phone calls. I wrote a flaming e-mail to another technical support channel, demanding that someone fix the problem, and I went for a nice sail to improve my declining state of mind. The next day I received an e-mail saying that the Version 4.2.0 software was being sent by snail-mail (no overnight express for whiners).

When the new CD arrived several days later, the software installed without a hitch, the printer worked as well with XP as it had with OS X, and my granddaughter stopped asking why I was so grumpy.

### **Product Design 101**

My combined cell phone and PDA stopped holding a charge a few weeks ago. However, it worked fine when connected to a power cord (not a good feature for a mobile phone). I visited a store that specializes in this model and was told: “Usually the battery lasts more than fifteen

months.” This was not a particularly helpful piece of information, but the really depressing news was that the phone was designed so that a new battery could not be replaced in the field. The phone had to be returned to the factory, where something mysterious would happen to enable a new battery to be inserted, at a big expense. The engineers who designed this product were smart enough to create a miniature camera that takes terrible pictures, but they weren’t smart enough to design a power supply that can be replaced by the owner.

Shortly after this unhappy event, my new GPS arrived in the mail to replace the device I had been using for the last six years. This one had more memory, more pixels, better form factor, longer battery life, faster rendering of complex courses, easier-to-read display, etc., etc. However, the computer interface cable came with only an RS-232 serial port connector. A call to the manufacturer to request the appropriate laptop USB-compatible cable elicited the surprising information that even though the engineers had not designed a USB cable for their new GPS, an adaptor could be purchased from the online store—for a lot of money. The helpful technician then whispered that a simple search on the Web would produce lots of adaptors that sell for a small fraction of what the manufacturer was charging. Since an online computer is the only way to get up-to-date navigational information and mapping changes, one has to wonder about the motives of these product engineers.

I then attended the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) symposium at a superb hotel on the coast of New Hampshire. The hotel provided free high-speed Internet service and an Ethernet cable in each room for its guests. All one had to do was plug-and-play. Wrong. After I was moved to a new room because the port in the first one did not work, I

discovered that even though this connection was live, no Internet sites could be reached. After another long discussion with another cheerful technician, and after much pinging and disabling of security features, the network configurations in both XP and my browser were manually set to work correctly with the ISP. Before this technician could utter “have a nice day,” I remembered to ask him to explain how to unwind the large hairball he had inserted in my system.



Illustration by Derek Lea, © 2005

### Observations

All of us who work in the IT service arena need humbling experiences like these to remind us how little we know and how complex a web we have spun for our users. We need to take our own medicine. Most of our users do not care about the underlying technology. Why do people put up with such nonsense, and why can’t we do a better job helping them? Most users just want to get important, and seemingly simple, tasks done wherever they are and whenever they want to do them. Many have learned, by experience, how digital technologies can enrich their

lives and make them more productive if they persevere.

Some of us, however, have preached that the technology is actually very simple and that individuals do not need to learn much to use it. Well, it isn’t simple. In fact, when you think about it for a couple of milliseconds, the technology is almost magical. We—the IT service providers—need to learn how to better inform our constituents about complex IT issues: about spam, phishing, security, encryption, wireless, copyright laws, and network and system complexities. Even experts in our field do not understand all of these issues in depth, so we have a large task to extract essential information and package it in ways that people can and will digest, while at the same time we must stop trying to convince users that this is all very simple.

The help-desk support systems that even the multi-billion-dollar corporations put in place don’t solve the problem. Take a look at the support-desk system on any campus. Can a normal person discover what number to call without knowing a whole lot about their problem or the organizational structure? Will anyone be there to answer the call? Will the technicians know the answer to the question, or more important, will they have a good escalation procedure in place for when they are asked the inevitable questions they can’t answer?

“Have a nice day” just isn’t enough.

### Note

1. Geoffrey Kurland, *My Own Medicine: A Doctor’s Life as a Patient* (New York: Times Books, 2002).

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