TECHNOLOGY EXPERTS AND THE COMMON TECHNOLOGY USER: SHALL THE TWAIN EVER MEET?

It is comforting to know that some things are timeless. The sound of the ocean surf. And now, the gulf between the highly trained networking and technology experts and the inexperienced technology users. Whether in business or education, there is at the very least a “tsk, tsk” uttered in private by the technology experts about the users. Stories abound about such user follies as using the CD-ROM drive bay as a cup holder. At its most extreme, there may be a desire to lock out, bolt down, shut off, and otherwise control the use of networks by the “damn users.” In a reflective, albeit impractical moment, a network engineer may be heard to mutter, “If it weren’t for the users, our network would never fail.”

INTEGRATING INNOVATION INTO THE MAINSTREAM

Most learn that migrating innovation into mainstream practice is a complex task. Geoffrey Moore (Crossing the Chasm and Living on the Fault Line) points out that technology first has a destabilizing effect. Normal mechanisms for adapting to change tend to behave like antibodies that act to reject change as a possible threat to “life” (Moore, 2001). Educators and technology experts have not had to understand and accommodate each other’s needs and requirements quite as closely as is now required by the full integration of networking technologies into teaching and learning. There is no more demanding technology environment than the school and college classroom. There is no more demanding setting in which to use network resources than the instructional setting.

Because of these factors, this discussion focuses on the relationship between Core versus Context. The word “core” refers to the key skill and its application. The word “context” refers to the environment in which this skill is applied. For technology experts and educators, what is core and what is context is vastly different. In some cases what is core for one is context for the other. Herein lies part of the complexity of network support and the source of a key barrier to successful technology implementation.

DISCUSSION OF CORE VERSUS CONTEXT

“I Hate the Sales Force!”

Let’s use a hypothetical situation, such as the gulf between the engineers and the sales group in a technology company, to dramatize the definitions of Core and Context. For the senior network engineers, the technology is Core. Customer expectation, the implementation environment, time frames, and so forth are all context. The sales team’s Core is the environment, timeframes, customer expectation, and so forth. So the Core for the sales team is the context for the network engineers.

The engineers despise (maybe distrust is a better word?) salesmen because salesmen always over-promise. The sales team is annoyed by the engineers because they are always saying something cannot be done…meaning it cannot be done in that environment, in that timeframe, and to meet the customer’s expectations. But the engineers must eventually accommodate the fact that until a sale is made, nothing happens…the engineer cannot install and support an elegant technology solution until a customer has ordered it. The sales person must also understand and accommodate the engineer’s core responsibility, and sell something that can actually be implemented and supported by the engineer.

Is there a solution to the salesman/engineer dilemma? How does one side develop empathy for the other’s position? Would it help to teach the salespeople more about the technology so they do not over-promise and put the engineers in a conundrum? Perhaps we could teach the engineers a little about the sales process so
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