Trials and Tribulations of a Non-Geek Engineer

When I was in college, a little music group I played with recorded a humorous parody of a song in response to a fight that broke out at the end of a basketball game. As the evil team we played prepared to venture to our arena, the song got a fair amount of airplay on a local radio station. Knowing there were far more talented musicians who would never be on the radio, I was content to take my 15 minutes of fame and go home. Now, here I am, an environmental engineer writing a column for a software journal. The reason I am writing this is in response to the May 2002 BackTalk column "Week of the Geek." I found that I did not fit the mold of the geek very well. I am an engineer, but just where do I fit in?

While my dad and sister are steeped in high-tech engineering pursuits, I seemed to be destined for water and wastewater projects for the Air Force. Growing up an Air Force brat, my earliest introduction to these projects was venturing into wading pools at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in my clothes to the point where my dad would have to retrieve me, often in his Sunday best or Air Force uniform. My earliest wastewater experience was losing a Snoopy in the sewer when my dad was stationed in Korea. Not to mention the countless number of times I set up Army men in the yard only to turn on the hose and flood them all out in a watery mess.

These used to be chances for me to get into trouble, but now I make a living at it. For example, on a recent trip to an overseas installation, as part of our study, we opened a fire hydrant, which ripped half the bark off of a tree by the wing commander's house. As a kid, I would have been sent to my room, been introduced to a belt, and told, "don't do that." As an engineer, I now go to a conference room and get introduced to the base civil engineer where I am told "good job."

This disconnect I have with software engineers was never more evident than the May BackTalk. The indicators of geekiness were well laid out, but I failed the test miserably. After some reflection, I determined that it is possible to be an engineer and a non-geek. After some painstaking research (conducted on several drives home), I came up with the following indicators of a non-geek engineer:

- You read Dilbert and wonder why everyone picks on the pointy-haired guy.

- You are shunned by the "Beta Geek" cliques.
- You read the assembly instructions for your kids' toys before you attempt to put them together.
- You identify the picture in the May 2002 BackTalk column as "T.J. Hooker looking at wigs."
- You tell the Wal-Mart associate in the computer department that you want a computer with a "Baud modem."
- You shop for computers at Wal-Mart.
- In reading the May 2002 BackTalk, you wondered if "X" was a variable for all "Dummies" books or an actual programming language.
- You think "Fry's" is a place to order unhealthy food.
- You did not buy Star Wars tickets until the day you actually saw (or will see) the movie.
- You think "TNG" is a copycat of the rap group "Run DMC" and has nothing to do with Star Track.
  - You say Star Track.
    - You have no computer disks of any kind on your person at this moment.
      - When you see the sign that says, "Positive I.D. check in progress," as you approach the guard shack, you think the guard is going to say something nice about your driver's license photo.
      - When you shop for a car, you are more concerned about gas mileage than gadgets.
      - The cross talk you read is a journal for backflow prevention devices.
      - You only subscribe to CrossTalk (the software journal) because your sister is the associate publisher.

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