



Beware the Engineer

I need to begin this column by saying that everybody has a few obsessions. What's mine? I am extremely punctual. My watch is set weekly (via WWV, the National Institute of Standards and Technology short-wave radio station). In fact, a few of my friends might call me obsessive-compulsive about time.

Shortly after I married my beautiful wife Marcia, my wristwatch broke. She truly showed she understood my needs by buying me a very nice and very accurate replacement – it gained just two seconds a week.

About three years ago, the battery in the watch died. I went to the jewelry store in the mall to get a new battery. A young person who couldn't have completed high school opened my watch, replaced the battery, and reassembled it. Later that evening, I noticed that the face of the watch (the round sheet with the numerals on it) had slipped a few degrees, so that the numerals no longer lined up correctly with the hands. I disregarded my wife's advice to take it back to the jeweler the next day. Instead, I made the following three observations: 1) I am a well-trained engineer, 2) I have a set of miniature tools, and 3) if the young person not-out-of-high-school could do it, so could I!

Let's cut to the end of the story. The watch manufacturer eventually sent the watch back to me with a note saying it would be cheaper to just buy a new one. Moral of the story: Engineers can't fix everything they think they can. (Moral No. 2: Never try to fix anything your spouse gave you).

Unfortunately, you now need to ignore the moral of this story (I know I already have) because you are an engineer. Would a heart surgeon decide to do brain surgery? No way. Would a licensed plumber offer to wire your house for you? Probably not. Would a person who has built databases offer to help design a real-time radar system? Sure! As a matter of fact, as engineers we are expected to be adaptable.

Look at an employer's rationale: "Nobody has ever done exactly what we're doing, so we are willing to take people who are just plain ol' good engineers." As a matter of fact, as engineers you are expected to be flexible to a degree unheard of in other professions. Let's face it – we are EXPECTED to think that whatever it is, we can do it!

I'm not saying this is a good thing, but in today's job market (where there is still a severe shortage of trained and qualified engineers), we are willing to take warm bodies and not look at their qualifications too closely. We're trained early to be geeks and to think that we can fix almost anything (with incomplete or poor requirements, poor management ... don't get me started!).

Last May, I wrote a BackTalk called "Week of the Geek." In it, I suggested several indicators that you might have geek-like tendencies. I asked for additional suggestions and received quite a few. It made me feel good to know two things: 1) people do read this column, and 2) ... I thought I was a geek?

As promised, here are some of the better geek indicators I received. If you read any of these indicators and think, "Gee, I do that!" well, it's not just me who thinks you're a geek, too!

- For entertainment, you read a book on mathematics or engineering.
- You have an integrated PDA/cell phone/mobile Web device. Extra geek points if you wear it around your neck.
- You own two or more computers, but only one of them is functional at any given time because you're working on upgrades to all the rest. Extra points if you have enough parts left over from previous computer upgrades to build a whole new computer.
- Choosing to buy flowers for your girlfriend vs. upgrading your RAM is a moral dilemma.
- In college you thought the phrase spring break meant mental fatigue failure (come on, think about it).
- The sales people at the local computer store can't answer your questions.
- You sit backwards on Disneyland rides to see how they do the special effects.
- You've tried to repair a \$5 radio.
- You look forward to Christmas so you can put the kids' toys together.
- You think that people yawning around you are sleep deprived.
- Your laptop computer costs more than your car.
- A real geek knows that "resistance is futile" is what the Borg says in Star Trek, but "resistance is useless" is what the Vogon say in "The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy."
- Your watch does not automatically

synchronize itself, but you do have a bookmark on your browser pointing to the atomic clock.

- You find yourself interrupting computer store salesmen to correct something they say.
- You've accidentally dialed an IP address.
- Your friends use you as tech support.
- You've named a computer.
- You have your local computer store on speed dial.
- You can't carry on a conversation without talking about computers.
- Co-workers have to e-mail you about the fire alarm to get you out of the building.
- You've found "stray" diskettes when doing laundry.
- Your computer has its own phone line – but your teenager doesn't.
- You check the national weather service Web page for current weather conditions (rather than look out the window).
- Your pet has a Web page.
- You get really excited when Yahoo adds your link.
- You've tried to use your Palm IR port to re-program Furbies.
- You're definitely an old or retired geek if you talk about the "good old days" where you could program your Timex/Sinclair with 64 KILOBYTES. Extra points if you know CP/M. Double extra points if you know PICK OS.
- You're an old or retired geek if you own both a pocket protector and a slide rule, and you know how to use them both without referring to the instruction manuals.
- You're an old or retired geek if you've ever mounted a magnetic tape reel.
- You have a license plate with a programming language on it (or are at least, thinking "Wow – That's cool! I wish I had one!").
- You wanted to know if my original list was posted to a list server.

Thanks to Dawn Jaeger, Lynn Knight, Christopher Smith, Robert Smith, James Meyers, Chuck Calhoun, Claire Jones, Ray Rangel, Clark Duplichie, Bob Mathis and Joe Urda, among many others.

— David A. Cook, Geek in Residence
Software Technology Support Center