1st Aug 2003

Excuse Me, Are You an IT Professional?

By: Adam Chee W.S

Note: **This article is also published at MCMCSE.com**

My first salaried job was in the IT industry as a System Support Engineer back in 1997 and I have since worked with quite a number of IT professionals.... but are they really legitimate IT professionals?

The sad truth about this industry is that it consists of a large percentage of highly unqualified people, and these people are seriously tarnishing the image of real IT professionals with their incompetence, lack of real knowledge and poor behavior. The problem starts with the mentality of non-technical people in positions of influence who believe that IT professionals are people who know how to use a mouse and all IT problems can be solved with a click.

This is a very scary definition and it has introduced two major headaches into the current IT industry.

Problem # 1 - Mismatched and Overworked IT Professionals

This is a serious problem because most hiring managers and HR professionals see no difference between a programmer and a system administrator; we are just the people who sit in front of the computer all day pressing a few buttons. (*This leads to the common phenomena where a system engineer is asked to do programming jobs or a web developer is forced to maintain a network.*)

However, the worst that can really happen to any IT professional is being turned into a "one man IT department". Imagine yourself doing everything from data-entry to end-user support, system administration, network setup, programming, web design, IT related paper work, liaison with vendors, and not to mention meetings and sometimes electrical appliances/equipment every single day of your working life.

And this is indeed happening because managers have the impression that anything related to IT can simply be solved with just a click or 2 on a computer icon. Poor chaps like these will most probably die of overwork or caffeine-poisoning. Even if they survive the abuse, they will most likely become disgruntled and in need of therapy.

To illustrate the problem in a different manner, let's use the context of a hospital. Imagine that there is only 1 neurosurgeon in a hospital and this hospital performs 2 neuro-surgeries everyday (each surgery takes 4 hours). We also have 10 junior doctors who are supposed to attend to 50 cases of the flu everyday (*each common flu consultation takes 10 minutes*).

If you are the CEO of this hospital, would you have the neurosurgeon handle the flu patients every day? You'll end up having 10 idle junior doctors, 1 extremely overworked neurosurgeon and 2 dead patients every day.

BinaryHealthcare.com
Industrial Evangelist

Problem # 2 - Devaluation of the Industry and Productivity

With such a large number of unqualified people in the IT industry, it is not surprising that most IT professionals view each other with skepticism. We tend to worry whenever a new engineer arrives because we never know if the guy is just another joke. While it is not a crime not to know everything under the sun (*which is impossible anyway*) it is a sin to act as if you do. I have had my fair share of working with jokers as well as being perceived as a joke. It's just a vicious cycle which only serves to remind us that continuous learning is part of being a real IT professional.

To better explain my point, I've classified the people dealing with computers into a few major categories.

End-user	• The typical "End-User" thinks that IT professionals spend their time in university learning how to use Microsoft Office. (*To them, IT evolves around Microsoft Office*) • Insists that rebooting a PC requires a PHD in Computer Science. • To them, there is no difference between a Network Engineer and a Database Administrator. We are just the people who sit down in front of the computer and play computer games.
Power-User	• Knows how to operate the basic Windows and Microsoft Office Suite well. • Some rare specimens are worthy of being of assistance to the "Freshie" technician/programmer. • Occasionally suffers from mental delusions (*thinks they are on par with a Computer Science graduate*) and would mislead management into thinking that all aspects of computing involves only 3 clicks on the mouse. • Can be quite irritating at times when they try to convince you that they are professional programmers since that know how perform basic calculations in Microsoft Excel.
Hobbyist	• Usually spend their free time dabbling in certain aspects of IT (e.g. PC assembly or home networking). • Some "Hobbyists" are on par with the "Freshie" from school although their lack of knowledge on the basics can be shocking. • The unenlightened ones can be quite irritating with their jester-like behavior. • Some real IT professionals of one discipline can be a "Hobbyist" of another discipline. (*E.g. A System Administrator can be a hobbyist webmaster*)
Freshie / Junior	• "Freshies" are computer professionals who just graduated from a university/school. • Usually working at a helpdesk, junior technicians/programmers or assistant engineers. • Some tend to think that they are better than their senior counterparts since they learned the latest technology in school. (*And some of them are!*) • Technically incompetent "Freshies" tend to evolve into the egotistical "Junior" staff.

	• "Junior" staff can be quite irritating as they like to insist that their methods are correct when the problem lies with their lack of real knowledge.
Generalist	• Been in the industry for a few years and usually have a diploma/degree in Computer Science or IT. • Some "Generalists" have been in the industry for quite a long period of time but chose not to specialize due to personal interest or the lack of it. • Usually competent/familiar with major aspects of computing. (*E.g. System Administration, Inter-Networking, RDBMS, Web Technology, Programming, etc.*) • Are usually very good/fast troubleshooters as they know most aspects of IT and how they work together. • Can sometime be slow or stuck when troubleshooting certain high level problems due to lack of specialization or when dealing with a vendor's proprietary products.
Specialist	• Very focused in one discipline of the industry (*e.g. inter-networking*) or one section of a discipline (*e.g. programming in C++*) • Some "Specialists" of one discipline are typically also "Generalists" (*E.g. Specialist in Inter-Networking but is familiar with System Administration and RDBMS*) • A "Specialist" tends to work with vendor proprietary products. (*E.g. Sun Microsystems or Microsoft*)
God-mode	• "Specialist" in almost all aspects of computing. • Usually highly intelligent and very technically inclined. • Earns the respect and love of other IT professional. (*This is very rare*)
Application specialist	• Usually "Power Users" with explicit knowledge in a certain industry. (*E.g. Accounting, Nursing*) • Functions like an operator but are deemed as high value due to their knowledge of a specific industry. (*E.g. an accounting application specialist needs accounting background to communicate and tech the end-users on how to use an accounting application*)
Wannabes	• "Wannabes" are "End-Users" or "Power-Users" who try to enter the IT profession by passing vendor certifications (*E.g. A+ ,MCSE*) with unscrupulous methods such as memorizing books and braindumps. • Usually does not possess any tertiary education in IT and does not understand how actual systems (*servers, networks*) function in real production environments. • Usually egotistical and self-deceiving believing that they know as much as real IT professionals or even more. • Usually embarrass themselves with their attempts to display their knowledge or rather the lack of it. (*Imagine dancing chimpanzees in human clothing*) • Can be extremely irritating as they are always clueless, yet always trying to save their pride when facing real IT professionals.

Paper Engineers	• "Wannabes" who managed to con their way into getting a job that requires a real IT professional. • Usually panics when a real problem occurs. • Some "Paper Engineers" eventually realize their insignificance and evolve into IT professionals after they put in real efforts to learn what they need to.

I did not include project managers, sales personnel nor IT managers in the list above because they are usually just "Power-Users" unless they started out with a technical background.

To give an example, I have recently worked with an IT Project Manager who insisted that I forsake all of my administration duties and perform some basic typing in Microsoft Word for her (*It was needed in a hurry and her own staff were not around*). In my opinion, she failed to fulfill 2 very basic requirements needed for her job as an IT project manager;

1. **The skills to use basic office productivity tools**.

To quote a phase from the article - [Dealing With The Technophobic](#)

"If a job involves the use of a computer, then the employee should be required to know how to use it to a satisfactory level, whether the use of the computer is the focus of their job or not. Many restaurants use computers for the wait staff to enter orders into. Is it acceptable for a waiter to not know how to use the computer because it is not the focus of their job? Of course not! The same goes for everyone else"

I have no idea how often she actually torments her own engineers by making them type her reports or presentations, but how can she even fathom and manage IT projects when she doesn't even know how to utilize basic office productivity tools? If the company needs to pay for another full-time employee just to makeup for her lack of computer skills, then I doubt that she is worth her salary and job title.

2. **Lack of interpersonal skills**

As a project manager, part of her role includes communicating on the behalf of us techies. She was so blunt and tactless with her military style of commanding, I seriously doubt her worth as a liaison. Throughout her display of ignorance, she didn't even say the magic word - "Please". (*I don't even work for her*)

Conclusion

The only way that IT professionals can ever regain their rightful respect and monetary value is to hope that the younger generation are tech-savvy enough to understand the complexity of our jobs and that they are smart enough to identify the real professionals from the quacks.

Until such a day actually happens, we will have no choice but to endure.

Contact

Media and all other Queries: media@binaryhealthcare.com

About BinaryHealthcare.com

BinaryHealthcare.com is a vendor-neutral knowledge management repository pertaining to selected IT topics, Healthcare Informatics and its relevant industries (Biomedical Engineering, Radiology, Health Informatics, Telemedicine etc.) for working Professionals, students and anyone who is interested in this unique profession.

For more information, visit www.binaryhealthcare.com