FROM THE EDITOR

Communicate, Communicate!

by Kate M. Schell

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Have you reviewed IT job advertisements recently? I keep my eye on the listings in the *Washington Post*, partly to see what skills are needed, and partly to see who's doing what. More and more, I'm seeing phrases such as "excellent communications skills." Here's a sampling from a recent Sunday:

- "Excellent communications skills, as well as the ability to be detail oriented"
- "Strong customer presentation/interface skills are necessary"
- "excellent communication/business skills"
- "exceptional organization and presentation skills"
- "excellent oral and written skills"
- "excellent interpersonal and communications skills"
- "Strong verbal and written communication, teamwork, troubleshooting, problem solving and interpersonal skills ..."

I suppose it's true that most programmers didn't major in literature or speech, but why the emphasis on "communication"? How many folks do you know whose idea of a post-graduate course is an afternoon on the Internet, or an email to a friend? The IT industry needs people who can communicate proposals, plans, and project status. To successfully run a project, you need to be able to write understandable memos, to be able to stand up and present your ideas in front of an audience, and to be able to effectively communicate with a range of people whose technical experience may be narrower than yours. You may have to teach other people what you know. I don't meet many recent computer science graduates who have these skills.

So, if the skills aren't acquired in school, where are you supposed to learn them? Don't look to the internet. "Netiquette," isn't! Anonymous exchanges from the security of your cubicle don't require tact, finesse, or decent spelling. It seems to be perfectly acceptable to demonstrate your "superiority" at the expense of others on the net. How many postings on comp.lang.mumps these days start out with "so-and-so surprised us with ..."? My other favorite is "IMHO" (In My Humble Opinion). The opinion put forward is never expressed in humble terms; the presentation is arrogant. Don't try this in the workplace. To communicate effectively with the boss or with your co-workers, you need a bit of tact, a bit of polish, and a sense of timing. To be considered an "excellent communicator" you need writing and presentation skills, and you should be able to run a meeting.

If you can't find communications skills on the programmer's universal

resource, where do you go? Some folks go to an organization called "Toastmasters," some folks attend professional conferences as members of panels, as speakers, or as teachers. Some lucky folks get trained by their organizations. A university sent me to a number of excellent leadership preparation workshops on everything from running a meeting to performing employee evaluations. I've honed my presentation skills through participation in the MTA conference, starting with a round table over a decade ago, and working up to full day tutorials on the M standard.

Particularly for technical personnel, communication skills don't happen, they are learned. I'm no exception, even if my undergraduate and graduate degrees are in literature. Why should becoming an "excellent communicator" matter to you? Here are the types of job listings containing the quotes from the end of the first paragraph. Any job can have a "communications" requirement:

- Systems Financial Administrator
- Financial Team Leader
- Web Software Developer
- Business Development - IT Outsourcing
- Network Engineer
- Regional Sales Manager
- Database Security Analyst
- Programmer Analyst.

The next job you want may require "excellent communications skills." Do you have them? If so, congratulations! If not, get started now. Look into training, plan attendance at professional meetings, or join a civic association and learn on-the-job in your community. It's up to you to acquire the skills that you bring to your next job. The sooner you start, the better. **M**

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