

## Strategic Skills for 1994: A Technical Support Top 10 List

Nineteen ninety-three was a year of transition for the Information Systems community. Uncertainty of what the data processing future would be like was painfully prevalent. It was hard to get a feeling for which operating system and network environment to "bank on."

Mainframe systems and the people who support them took quite a beating. They were required to do more with less of everything. It seemed the demands on trained personnel went up exponentially, with more expected and very little slack given. I equate this phenomena to what airline captains currently suffer. An airline captain once commanded tremendous respect, now he is just a glorified "bus driver." However, his duties and responsibilities did not change one bit. Perhaps the mystique simply went away.

Systems technical support staff suffered much the same indignities. How many times were senior personnel woken up at 2 a.m. to solve problems that were previously handled by either a trained operator (rapidly becoming extinct) or by a junior tech support person. Now, it seems some people will not take responsibility for their actions and will shove the problem (and the blame) onto others.

Some corporations seem ready to nail anyone who makes a mistake. Because of this, some operators and junior technical support staff members are afraid to attempt repairs for fear of retribution (and maybe job loss). And so the senior staff member's phone rings far too often for routine problems.

These senior people are normally also managers or leads. This means in the morning they must report to upper management why the system had problems during the night.

Lack of sleep, too much pressure and too many responsibilities, coupled with the fear (perceived or real) of job loss spells stress, which can lead to burnout.

How many of us are seriously thinking about leaving technical support positions because of these unrealistic demands? We are known for our "can do" attitude and fierce pride in solving problems no one else can. Like the airline captain, we used to command respect for our skills and abilities, and had managerial support to take calculated risks in doing our job.

Maybe we should all quit doing technical support and become client/server programming jocks. That seems safe, since no one seems to know much about it but everyone is interested in doing it. There might very well be more job satisfaction (as well as security) in vague rather than concrete skills.

What can we do? Should we all get discouraged and collectively quit? I think not. Nineteen ninety-four should be a good year for IS support people. The U.S. recession is over (Europe and Japan are unfortunately still mired in recession) and the pent-up demand for 21st Century information systems is creating exciting jobs (and/or contracts) for people who possess the proper skills.

Most of the cards on now on the table. All of the "mystery" systems (such as Microsoft's Windows NT) are shipping and we have had the chance to examine both the wonders and the warts of all. All are good; however, all have problems, as systems will always have. IBM seems to be getting back on course and Novell and Microsoft were somewhat humbled by reality.

The name "OS/2" is no longer synonymous with "failure" and Windows NT is no longer vaunted.

They are both good, strategic operating system platforms that will enjoy long lives.

Unix is a wonderful system and is rapidly becoming an alternate operating environment to mainframe and AS/400 systems. If you don't believe me, ask around. Better yet, check your local Sunday classified advertisement section or ask your friendly neighborhood headhunter. The available product catalog for Unix-based systems is very impressive, and Unix itself is a systems programmers dream (or should I say, a Unix system administrators dream). Soon, Unix functions will be available in MVS.

Here are some skills that I feel are strategic, sort of a "Technical Support Top 10 List." This list is not all encompassing but is certainly food for thought. David Letterman's lists are more entertaining, but the items in this list might help keep food on your table.

1. Know why the enterprise computer center is and will remain a corporate asset.
2. Learn all you can about "open systems" and how they can be realistically implemented.
3. Know what products your shop currently has installed, what these products can do and how they can be exploited for use in an "open system" environment. MVS has several inherent "open system" functions, as well as some exciting near-future products (e.g., Open/MVS). Other products might include: TCP/IP, NFS, LANRES, ADSM, etc. (all mentioned products have been previously discussed in articles by myself and fellow NaSPA authors).
4. Become familiar with current "hot" systems like NetWare, Windows NT, OS/2 and Unix. If any are installed in your enterprise, personally get to know the techies responsible for each.



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**5.** Become "connectivity literate" by becoming familiar with TCP/IP, IPX-SPX, SNA in an heterogenous networking environment, as well as learn how to connect disparate systems to SNA.

**6.** Learn about the Open Software Foundation (OSF) Distributed Computing Environment (DCE). I have found Rosenberry, Kenney and Fisher's *Understanding DCE* (O'Reilly and Associates, Inc.) to be a valuable DCE learning and reference book.

**7.** Become conversant in object-oriented programming (C++, Smalltalk, etc.).

**8.** Be able to effectively sell your "open system" ideas (based upon your deep and broad knowledge of the total enterprise computing environment) to upper management.

**9.** Open your mind to other people's technical enthusiasms and ideas. MVS is good, but it is not the "greatest." Nor is VM, VSE, Microsoft Windows, UNIX, OS/2, NetWare, etc. All of these operating systems have their place in an enterprise.

**10.** Lastly, always remember no solution is perfect. No operating system and networking scheme is perfect, either. Leave the debate for "the perfect system" to the academics and the hobbyists. Accept industry trends at face value and get on with it.

For those of us who are prepared, 1994 will be an extremely exciting year.

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Was this column of value to you? If so, please let us know by circling Reader Service No. 38.

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