# Twelve qualities of successful support techs

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Take a look at a typical support tech job description, and you'll find a list of fairly standard skills and responsibilities: Installs, tests, and maintains PC and network hardware and software systems; establishes and maintains a parts inventory for personal computers; produces support documentation… and so on. But being a successful support tech requires more than the ability to perform a diagnostic test or image a workstation. It requires the appropriate attitude and aptitude. And while skills and knowledge can be taught, attitude and aptitude cannot—they have to be selected for when the tech is hired. The following is a list of traits that support the attitude/aptitude side of the equation.

## 1 Respect for all users, team members, and superiors—even when it's not reciprocated

Showing respect is an acknowledgement of another person's value and knowledge, an essential quality of a support tech. If the users don't believe that the support tech takes their problems seriously, they'll be less willing to communicate and they'll lose confidence in the tech, their equipment, and the IT department as a whole. It's particularly important for the support tech to have sufficient composure to remain respectful even when on the receiving end of verbal abuse from an angry, stressed, and frustrated user. Although the user's problem may seem trivial from the tech's perspective, all that really counts is the user's perception of the problem, and that's what the tech needs to address.

## 2 Self-discipline

Being self-disciplined affects several aspects of the support tech's job, such as setting and adhering to a schedule, reliably meeting deadlines, delivering resolutions to the end users on or before the promised date/time, and sticking with a task until it's complete. Self-discipline goes hand-in-hand with respecting users; by making deadlines a priority, the support tech is demonstrating respect for the user's time. Self-disciplined support techs are more reliable, dependable, punctual, and able to handle more responsibility than their less-disciplined counterparts.

## 3 The ability to effectively prioritize tasks

If support techs are given any degree of control over scheduling their time, they must be able to prioritize their tasks. Effective prioritizing requires the support tech to have detailed knowledge of each employee's role in the organization, a thorough understanding of the nature of the business, and a firm grasp of the business priorities. The rank and/or job function of the employee requesting assistance should usually figure as a major factor in prioritizing assignments. Assuming the environment is conducive to their doing so, support techs should do everything within their power to learn the business so they can gain the knowledge necessary for effective prioritizing.

## 4 Dedication and commitment to problem resolution

The tech must be committed to seeing the problem through to resolution, which occurs only when the user is satisfied that the problem has been resolved—and when the solution is permanent and conforms to company policy. Consider the following example: A user reports that he can't run a recently installed application. As a step in diagnosing the cause of the problem, the tech elevates the user from restricted to full administrative access to his machine. The user can now run the application, but the work order is not complete, as company policy requires the user to have restricted access. The user is under tremendous pressure to ship an urgent order, so the tech decides to allow him to finish processing the order with administrative privilege. If the tech is not committed to complete problem resolution, it would be easy to simply close the work order and move on, violating the company security policy. Support techs must be both willing and capable of following all the steps in a procedure even in a crisis situation, pursuing loose ends when necessary.

## 5 A detail-oriented working style

Paying attention to the details is essential for the successful completion of a work order. Although resolving a problem to the satisfaction of the user is necessary, it's not a sufficient condition for a work order to be considered complete. For instance, in the previous example, the tech still needs to determine the cause of the problem, fix it, document it, and restore the user to his usual status. The longer the tech takes to do this, the more problems could arise. Paying attention to the details helps ensure a consistent, secure, and reliable computing environment.

## 6 The ability and willingness to communicate

In many organizations, the support tech is the most visible member of the IT department, in daily contact with the end users. In this role as representative of the IT function and as intermediary between IT and end user, effective communication is critical. The support tech basically has to serve as a Babel Fish, translating between Tech-ese and Human. The tech must learn to listen to users, acknowledge the reality of their problems, translate their descriptions into technical terms, fix the problems, and explain the solutions in terms the users can understand.

## 7 The willingness to share knowledge with team members, superiors, and users

One specific aspect of the support tech's communications skills is a willingness to share knowledge. Some employees attempt to attain job security through the possession of unique knowledge. This is misguided, as most employers are aware of the vulnerability this creates and will seek to rid themselves of such employees. The willingness to share knowledge is an essential part of being a team member. Most support techs work under great pressure, with little time for research or training, so they often depend upon other team members for the advancement of their knowledge. In addition to sharing knowledge with peers, techs should be willing to educate their users. Training users to make effective use of their applications and peripherals and teaching them to accurately report computer problems will help reduce user downtime and speed problem resolution.

## 8 A humble attitude about knowledge limitations

Techs should recognize that they'll never know everything about an issue—the key is to know where to look for information and resources and to be willing to ask for help when they need it. They must be prepared to read manuals and take correction from others. It takes a certain humility to crack open a manual, go to a colleague for a solution, or press [F1].

## 9 The ability to learn from experience and from informal/formal instruction

After years of school and technical training, it's all too easy for techs to relax their drive to learn, assuming that now that they're employed in their chosen profession, they have all the knowledge needed to perform the job function. This may be true in certain environments, but if the tech ever wants to change positions and/or companies, he or she will soon find that the knowledge is out-dated and of limited use. Rapid change is an inherent characteristic of information technology, and those who want to remain productive within the industry must actively seek out every opportunity to further their knowledge, whether through formal training by attending classes or simply by reading, participating in forums, and asking questions of co-workers.

## 10 The ability to think logically and creatively

Techs should be able to apply a consistent, logical methodology to the resolution of computer problems. This means that even when confronted with new situation, the tech will stand a good chance of being able to resolve the problem, or at least isolate the problem area. To back up their logical thinking, techs also must be able to make creative leaps in reasoning when the application of logic fails to produce a satisfactory resolution.

## 11 The ability to apply knowledge to new situations

This ability goes along with being a logical, creative thinker to form the essential nature of an outstanding troubleshooter. Some techs I've worked with are excellent at following prescribed procedures in familiar situations but are completely stymied when confronted with an alien situation. Being able to adapt specific knowledge to new situations is extremely important; in most environments, it would be impossible to train the techs in every possible scenario. The very nature of troubleshooting requires the ability to transfer knowledge.

## 12 A demonstrated independent interest in technology

I'm almost hesitant to include this as an essential attribute of a support tech, as I once walked out of a job interview when I was told they were seeking a candidate who “lived, breathed, slept, walked, and talked technology.” In my experience, this type of person often makes a lousy support tech, due to a lack of interpersonal skills. Having said this, I still maintain that if the tech has no independent interest in technology and just regards it as a job, it will be an ongoing battle to keep the tech up to date with the latest developments or to elicit any form of enthusiasm or excitement for the work. Having a tech who is engaged and excited about new technology becomes particularly important during a rollout, where the tech is uniquely positioned to influence users' attitudes toward the changes in their environment. Rollouts can cause considerable stress to users who are now required to learn a new product to perform their job function. Having a tech who is excited and engaged with the new product will encourage and reassure the users.

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