

Educating an “Old Guy”

BY MIKE SUTTON

I've been doing some consulting work for a major Internet/Extranet player for the last couple of months. This company, whose name is certainly a household word for most people who surf the 'net and many of America's and the world's major corporations, hired me to share my knowledge and experience with them. However, I may be getting far more out of this engagement than they are. Let me explain.

Shortly after our coming to terms contractually, I went to their world headquarters for a couple of weeks to get the lay-of-the-land, so to speak. While there I attended more meetings than I can remember, but from the first, I knew that this organization was very different.

One of the sessions I attended was designed to allow the staff members from several different departments to discuss technical problems and brainstorm about possible solutions. Now, you're probably saying: "So what?"

They referred to the meeting as a "Brown Bag," which was a term I'd heard used many times, meaning that you brought your own grub to a meeting held at noon. For any of you not familiar with this, it allows people to essentially squeeze a little more productive time out of their day.

Since I hadn't known about the meeting in advance, I didn't have a "bag packed," although living in a hotel wouldn't have offered me much opportunity anyway.

When I walked into the conference room for the meeting, I was met by three things I certainly didn't expect:

1. There was enough pizza — in more varieties than I'd seen when I lived in Italy — to feed an Animal House style party.
2. The most serious medical problem facing the vast majority of the attendees already in the room was acne!

“Education is man’s passage from cocksure ignorance to thoughtful uncertainty.”

— Unknown

3. Jerry Garcia!

As we grazed on pineapple and artichoke pizza — two of the more mundane varieties — I looked around the room and listened to the conversation about a deep technical issue. Sitting directly across from me was one of the few exceptions to the “I am too old enough to drive!” generation. If I hadn't seen the numerous television, radio and printed reports of Jerry Garcia's death, I'd have bet the farm that he'd dropped out of “The Dead” and taken up software engineering. And, as the coup de grâce... he was barefoot!

There were several things I saw in that room that truly amazed me:

- ◆ First, there was an incredible number of mental MIPS sitting around the table.
- ◆ Second, I didn't see a single case of ego or not-invented-here attitude although there were engineers from several different product groups participating.
- ◆ Third, the energy level there was strong enough to give you a suntan!
- ◆ Fourth, the Jerry Garcia look-alike and others his age had no problem with the “kids.” The few older people there didn't look over their trifocals and down their noses at their younger counterparts.
- ◆ Finally, and maybe most amazing of all, the kids treated those on Medicare's doorstep with nothing less than complete

respect. Ideas and experience were the most important things in that room, not age. Pizza was a close second.

I very quickly came to realize that this company had not only harnessed an incredible amount of technical talent, they had excited their employees about what they were doing. And, as a result, these people would do virtually anything to not just make their products work for the customers, but to ensure that anything with the company's logo on it was head-and-shoulders above the competition!

I, like many of you, have a “big iron” background. In the '70s, '80s and even the '90s, I deluded myself into believing that we were doing some pretty sophisticated things in the IS world and for those time frames, we were. Now I know that as networking grows — both inter and intra — we will quickly realize that from a computing standpoint, we have only begun to scratch the surface.

One of the most important things that I learned in college had nothing to do with electrical engineering. It was a simple quote, and I have no idea who should get credit for it. “Education is man's passage from cocksure ignorance to thoughtful uncertainty.” I continue to be in transit. **ts**

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