

From the Editor / Ed Foster

Doing the download dance is driving gripe-line callers crazy

Does it seem to you that you can hardly install any new product these days without having to call tech support to find out which updated drivers you need to download?

It seems that way to a number of folks on the gripe line. An increasingly common complaint comes from folks who say they had to download driver after driver in a futile effort to make a product work right. "Sometimes it seems like that's all some of these tech support people know," says one griper. "It's like a broken record: 'Download this, download that.'"

In principle, of course, it's great that vendors are able to take advantage of the technology to quickly and inexpensively distribute software their customers need. When you really need to get that bug fix or printer driver that's just become available, the ability to download it in a few minutes can be a lifesaver.

The problem, however, is that some vendors are blatantly abusing the technique, relying on it as a substitute for shipping a finished product. You don't really get what you paid for until you call support and download something. And, maybe even worse, some are also using it as a substitute for offering real support.

Just how generic this problem is may be illustrated by the recent experiences of Jim Schumacher, a system integrator in North Carolina. "In the last month, I've had the same thing happen to me with two different vendors," he says. "I called the support line because the product wasn't working



right, and in each case the support rep asked me for the file size and date on a particular driver and told me that I needed to download the new version." Upon downloading the supposedly new drivers, however, Schumacher discovered they were identical to the software he already had.

Why is this happening? Schumacher believes that the support staffs at many companies are under growing pressure to get customers off the line any way they can. "Everybody knows telephone support is going downhill and that these technical support staffs are overloaded," he says, calling it a "bump" syndrome. "They just want to bump you off and go on to the next call."

Support staffs are indeed awfully busy. A support rep who isn't overloaded is one who's probably about to get his or her pink slip.

But the vendors' customers are busy people, too. The hassle of downloading a piece of software that doesn't help is a hassle none of us need. "It costs me effort, time, and money when they give me this stock answer just to get me off the phone," Schumacher says. "And it really gets to you when it turns out they're lying to you — when they ask me for the date and file size so they know I don't really need that driver."

I'm going to resist the temptation to name names. Judging from the calls I've gotten, the problem appears to be widespread enough that I don't feel we should point fingers. Not yet, anyway. If the same names keep coming up, though ...

There's another interesting aspect to Schumacher's case that I'd like to explore because it touches on some gripes that we're going to be discussing in upcoming weeks. As a system integrator and a value-added reseller, Schumacher is directed to a special tech support line for authorized value-added resellers — not the same line for individual users.

This is also a support trend that Schumacher says he encounters more and more frequently. Vendors are paying less attention and devoting fewer resources to the support they give to the resellers and system integrators. "The reseller is being eliminated," says Schumacher, who like many other system integrators is starting to emphasize the consultant aspect of his role rather than the sales support side.

The reseller is becoming obsolete as vendors big and small get into direct sales. "Hey, why should the vendor pay the distributor or middleman anymore?" Schumacher notes. "Instead, the vendor opens up a direct sales wing and pulls that business into it. The reseller is a useless appendage."

Now, because most *InfoWorld* readers are not VARs or system integrators, this may not seem like a big problem for you or me. Some good things certainly can be said about direct sales. But I think this trend may have some implications for all computer customers, no matter what channel we buy through. More on that later.

Ed Foster is editor of InfoWorld. He gets electronic mail at MCI account 584-3453. Or, you can call (800) 227-8365, Ext. 710, to report a gripe you have with a vendor.

Peer to Peer / Robert Lewis

Lies, damn lies, and statistics: Gartner PC cost/benefit analysis is fishy

Robert Lewis is the manager of communications systems for the Star Tribune Co. in Minneapolis. He is also the author of Telecommunications for Every Business.

Does anyone else find The Gartner Group annoying?

I'm reviewing its "PC Cost/Benefit and Payback Analysis." The good news: I now understand the "Productivity Paradox." It comes from Gartner's inflated cost numbers.

The bad news: If Gartner is right, a lot of companies are spending far too much on some very basic items.

Example: Gartner's average hardware cost per system totals nearly \$5,000. I compared that with our costs. We use name-brand items: IBM ValuePoint 33-MHz 486 computers, SynOptics Communications Inc. concentrators, Compaq Computer Corp. file servers, and Novell Inc. networks. I can't get our per-system cost above \$3,500 no matter how hard I try.

Another example: Gartner uses a per-system average software cost of \$1,000 for four applications per system. Companies with LANs load software from the file server on a concurrent-use basis. All in all, I think we spend about \$300 per user on software. (I guess Gartner has never heard of discount software

vendors — the Borland International Inc. Office bundle gives you word processing, spreadsheet, and database applications for \$300.)

So far, I've saved \$2,200, or about 37 percent off Gartner's estimate.

In the world according to Gart, the single biggest expense comes from "End-user Operations" — a total of \$22,693 over a five-year period. (As an exercise to the reader, how do they know it's not \$22,695 or \$22,536? This

kind of phony precision looks impressive, but what does it mean?)

ing manual ways of doing the same chores, this also translates to doing your job.

Gartner assigns \$6,700 to formal and casual learning — about \$1,350 per year. But isn't this actually time invested in learning to be more productive?

About \$7,000 goes to the "Futz Factor," which I guess means fiddling around making things work right. Without a PC, this time (50 hours per year) would probably be spent sharpen-

amount goes to learning how to do your job better, and about \$7,000 represents truly wasted time. My, how problems diminish when you look at them more closely.

Here's the problem: Gartner has a point, and the point is that we can all improve the ways in which we manage PCs. Gee, what a surprise. Just like everyone else, we should be expected to do a better job next year than we did this year.

Because Gartner is so influential, we're all going to be hearing about the huge burden we're imposing on our employers with this life-draining technology. After all, who will our executives believe. The Gartner Group or their own employees?

The definition of an expert here in Minnesota is "a guy from the East Coast with slides." So I'm expecting Gartner to win without even a chance to debate the issues. Never mind that no employee accustomed to having a PC on the desk would ever give it up. After all, what do they know?

"Peer to Peer" gives readers a forum for discussing computing and management issues. Send submissions to Rachel Parker, opinions editor (MCI Mail 340-4371). Submissions can also be faxed to (415) 358-1269.

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If you look at Gartner's breakdown of this monstrous expense, you'll find that more than \$3,000 goes to "Data Management."

This translates, I suspect, to filing, which translates to filing paper, which translates to doing your job.

Another \$3,400 goes to "Application Development." Given that without a PC, the same people would be develop-

ing pencils, rearranging the furniture, and otherwise fiddling around. People are like that, with or without computers.

My absolute favorite expense: \$1,500 over five years in supplies. Are we talking about the paper needed to print out memos and spreadsheets? Without computers, we would still use the paper. Yes, we use more with computers, but this still translates to doing your job.

So in total, nearly \$8,000 of the \$23,000 goes to doing your job, a lesser

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