Techies can be an unruly lot who refuse to be bound by preconceived notions of rank, hierarchy and order. Managing to keep technicians happy, productive and on target is a very special business challenge.

There is a popularly held notion that the folks who staff your IT department are somehow — well, let’s be generous and say different — than the rest of your staff. There is good reason for this notion to be popularly held — it happens to be true. A masterful study of information technology and the people who make it is Paul Glen’s book, Leading Geeks (2003, Jossey-Bass). In it Glen explores our conflicted little psyches, the people who would attempt to lead us and the work we do. The result is a powerful insight into the trials and tribulations of harnessing both technology and the technician.

Paul Glen defines geeks as “the knowledge workers who specialize in the creation, maintenance or support of high technology.” His book makes a variety of observations about the nature of knowledge workers and the challenges associated with their tasks. His is a refreshing voice that speaks about leadership from the perspective of those who would be led, and applications from the perspective of those who make rather than buy them. Glen offers a bounty of practical observations, four of which I think are key to any discussion of hospitality technology and worthy of some close-up commentary.

**NO. 1. TECHNOLOGY IS YOUR SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT POINT OF DIFFERENTIATION.** The hotel industry has made many strides since that unfortunate overbooking incident that took place in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago. Over the intervening millennia most of the good hotel service concepts have already been put into play. When your leadership team gets together to brainstorm new ways to attract guests, rarely does one hear suggestions like, “I’ll bet our rooms would be much more comfortable if we put beds in them!” or “Maybe we should look into advertising this place.” The competitive advantage that we all seek will be realized in nuances of service and response. The leadership team will seek solutions based on established fundamentals, but will ask for greater results delivered to a larger audience more swiftly and more accurately. In this day and age a hotel’s edge is honed on technology and, like it or not, your establishment’s ability to differentiate itself and excel in its market is almost exclusively in the hands of your geeks.

**NO. 2. THOSE WHO DELIVER TECHNOLOGY ARE A TOUGH CROWD TO MANAGE.** Glen’s descriptions of geek characteristics — often humorous but always deadly in their accuracy — reminded me of one particular encounter I had many years ago. I was scheduled to use the research laboratory at a hardware manufacturer’s site. When I arrived another programmer was already there — a young bearded guy dressed in the requisite T-shirt, jeans and sandals. We nodded our acquaintance and I set to work at a terminal a few feet from him. After 20 minutes of silent production he turned toward me, leaned over and whispered conspiratorially, “Do you want to see what I have?” Momentary panic widened my eyes, but I thought to myself, oh what the hell. Whatever he had was going to be really good or really horrible so either way it was worth a look. I nodded my consent and he leaned over, opened his backpack and produced a tarantula the size of his hand. I was required to praise the coolness of his companion before he would return it to its container. While not every technician travels with playmates, this was nonetheless one of those quintessential moments in the geek fraternity.

Geeks view the world through their own technical squint. The science portion of information technology is extremely Boolean — things either work or they don’t; the software solves the problem or it doesn’t. Dealing with yes
MANAGING TECHIES

No. 3. Technology is the art and science of what you don’t know.

When we seek to improve our situation, we conceptualize the bridge that spans the gap from where we are to where we would like to be. If you’ve ever attended a strategic envisioning session you know that Step 1 is to behold paradise. You look across the river to the promised land. That part is relatively easy; we all see occupancies skyrocketing, happy guests who happily pay top dollar just to be with us and stockholders making more money than they can spend.

Step 2 is to envision the substance of the bridge, and the task becomes a little more challenging. Do we see concrete or stainless steel? A graceful arch or a suspension between towers? Two lanes or four? Toll booths or tax hikes?

Finally you graduate to Step 3, which is the most difficult step of all. Who does what to whom and when? How do we fit this bridge into an already strained budget and schedule? Even if we shove reality to the side and imagine that we have both the time and money to accomplish whatever needs doing, we still have to figure out what it is that we should do.

It is at about this point in the process that the day ends. You head for the cocktail lounge, where, with the assistance of measured doses of malt, barley and hops, it dawns on you that if you were smart enough to get to utopia then you would probably already be there. The fundamental disconnection between what we have and what we want is the path of the unknown. Advances in technology may provide a competitive edge, but what exactly goes onto that edge and how exactly it will function is a mystery that only begins to unravel itself as ideas are verbalized, prototypes are tried and refinements are made.

No. 4. The nature of the work is ambiguous; the results are prone to failure.

Not surprising, is it? If new applications are developed to meet newly defined requirements, then one might reasonably expect that not every product will hit its intended mark straight out of the chute. However, you may be surprised by how many technology projects fail. Glen cites the findings of the Standish Group, a noted consulting and research firm that evaluates thousands of application software projects each year. Standish ranks projects as successful if they are on time, on budget and major functionality appears as originally specified. Failed projects are those that are never brought to conclusion. Challenged projects, the balance of everything else, are those software products that are delivered late and/or over budget, or that have major features that are unfinished or missing. Based on these criteria the Standish Group’s 1998 report classified a whopping 26 percent of the projects surveyed as successful. (The good news about this dismal statistic is that it was nearly double the success rate reported in 1994.) Twenty-eight percent of the projects were outright failures and 46 percent were challenged. These figures give the reader a new appreciation for the difference between manufacturing and software engineering. Application products are tough to specify and even tougher to deliver within the expectations established at the outset of the project. (This points out another of Glen’s major corollaries: Budgets and schedules are such stuff as dreams are made on. And just to annoy the accountants, the earlier in the process that this information is requested, the more inaccurate it becomes.)

So let’s recap some of the important concepts outlined in Leading Geeks. You need technology and therefore you need people who are capable of creating, delivering and maintaining it. Techies can be an unruly lot who refuse to be bound by preconceived notions of rank, hierarchy and order. They are difficult to manage and oftentimes display more loyalty to their craft than they will to your organization. Technicians deal in the ambiguities and vagaries of our business and, statistically speaking, the products they deliver will cost more than budgeted and will do less than specified, provided they materialize at all. But you just gotta love us. We’re the best game in town.

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