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10+ dangerous species of help desk callers

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During my years working in IT support, I have become more and more interested in the many types of people who call IT help desks. Like a biologist, I have found that having a classification system is critical in understanding the users I help on a daily basis. With this in mind, and with my tongue in my cheek, I have categorized users into the following species.

Note: This information is also available as a PDF download.

#1: “The Expert”: Userus expertia

“The Expert” user is the curse of most IT support establishments. Experts try out something they heard about from “the bloke in the pub,” an unqualified expert on everything who offers advice to anyone who will listen. Experts usually make a complete mess of their systems when they follow the bloke’s advice. Then they compound the problem by trying to fix it themselves, often destroying their machines. As a last resort, they call the help desk and demand that their machines be replaced or mended immediately, as they have urgent work that can’t wait. There has been an Expert at every place I have worked. I leave it to you to decide who your resident Expert is.

#2: “The Fiddler”: Userus manipulate

The motto of “The Fiddler” is, “I wonder what happens if....” I’ve placed these callers next because they are closely related to the Expert. These callers don’t realize that some files actually make their computers work. If they don’t recognize a file as one of their own, they delete it and are surprised when something then stops working. Unlike the Expert, they don’t say anything about the problem; you only discover it months later from a casual remark, such as, “Oh no, that hasn’t worked for ages. I meant to call you.” Fiddlers are usually very pleasant people — who will drive you mad.

#3: “The Mouse”: Userus rodentia

“The Mouse” is more common than the previous two and fortunately, less harmful. For this species of caller, the big gray box is a source of blind terror. I can remember talking on the phone to a Mouse at a UK communications company. She had worked in a telephone exchange for years and was suddenly given a PC to help her. She had not asked for it and didn’t want it. The screen was making strange noises, and she was concerned.

“I don’t want it to explode or anything,” she wailed.

“No,” I said patronizingly, “They don’t explode. There’s no explosive in them.”

Then I heard a loud “BANG!” through the phone.

“What was that?” I asked.

“My screen has just exploded,” she replied.

#4: “The Train Spotter”: Userus geekissimus

“The Train Spotter” is most often the offspring of an Expert and a Fiddler. These callers are usually harmless and don’t have many computer problems. What they do have is an IT magazine, which they have read from cover to cover. The Train Spotters will invariably corner an unsuspecting help desk tech and proceed to bore the tech rigid by sharing their knowledge. The main difference between Train Spotters and other callers is that Train Spotters do not usually phone the help desk; they visit in person.

I’m not quite sure what they want from the help desk, but they take up a lot of time asking various questions about new innovations, about which I usually know nothing. I have found no explanation for the existence of this user other than that the Expert and Fiddler conceived the Train Spotter on a trip to a computer trade fair.

Who's calling the help desk?



#5: “The Paranoid User”: *Userus newbigata*

“Paranoid Users” are convinced that the computer has an intelligence of its own and is out to get them. The machine is constantly doing something that causes a problem. It will maliciously alter their documents, obliterate all references to their passwords, and lose work they have saved. If a machine is ever going to break down, it will be while being used by a Paranoid. This species’ one saving grace is determination. They never give up, as much as you wish they would.

#6: “The I’m-Building-a-Case User”: *Userus fabricatum*

“The I’m-building-a-case User” is grinding an axe to get some new gadget brought in or to have an old one taken away. They report hundreds of trivial problems, hoping upper management will buy them the latest all-singing and all-dancing machine. The real problem with this species of caller is the fact that they are usually not trying to replace computer equipment. This user doesn’t see the difference between computers and any other piece of office equipment. I have often been required to pass opinions on all kinds of electrical equipment even after pointing out my lack of knowledge on the subject. I do not evaluate coffee makers. I do not drink coffee, and I know nothing about the black arts involved in its production.

#7: “The Just-Testing User”: *Userus gustulata*

“The Just-Testing User” is not even using a computer but wants to test your knowledge and, if possible, trip you up. The best technique for dealing with this species is by answering questions with “I don’t know.” They cannot deal with this straight capitulation. Most Just-Testing Users would love the chance to show your boss how useless you are or how little you know. They are thrilled when you give a wrong answer and will crow about it incessantly.

#8: “Pig Pen”: *Userus perfumia*

Based on the Charles M. Schulz Peanuts character, “Pig Pen” has the messiest, most unhygienic work area in the company. Pig Pen’s personal hygiene is fine; it is only the workspace that is a hazard. It is a graveyard for old coffee cups, half-eaten green sandwiches, used Kleenex, and moldy sock collections. Pig Pens are some of the nicest and most technically able people you know. They usually give the help desk very little trouble except when their keyboard needs replacing, which is often. Pig Pen is a mainstay of most companies, the backbone of whatever department he or she works for. If that were not the case, the company would have let him or her go years ago.

#9: “The I-Don’t-Want-To-Hear-That! User”: *Userus headinsandia*

This is a rather curious species. They call, ask a question, and if they don’t hear what they want, they take it personally. I always wonder why they ask if they don’t want to know the answer. It does not seem to matter that what they want is not possible. All they want is to hear the answer they’re looking for.

#10: “The End-Of-My-Tether User”: *Userus adlimitus*

This type of user is the angriest but, perversely, often the easiest to deal with. After spending weeks attempting to resolve their own queries, they finally swallow their pride and call the help desk. Calls from this type of user usually end in one of three ways:

The problem’s solution can be found simply by reading page 1 of his instruction manual, which, of course, these callers haven’t done. Callers are informed that the operation they’re trying to perform can’t be performed with the equipment or software they have. Callers have already found a solution but phoned the help desk to let you know how frustrated, mad, or unsatisfied they are.

#11: “The Nice User”: *Userus pleasantia*

Userus pleasantia was long thought extinct but has recently been observed by TechRepublic member **Dennis R** in the forests near Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. This user is mostly harmless and can be recognized by its familiar cries of “Please” and “Thank you.”

“The Nice User” listens carefully, explains his or her problem clearly, and follows suggested procedures. Because of their tendency to think before they act, calls from these users are rare. I have personally encountered this species of help desk caller several times during

my career, and each time, they help restore my faith in the end user.

#12: “The I-Don’t-Believe-You User”: Userus suspictica

These users will ring for assistance, ask a question, listen carefully to your answer, and promptly refuse to accept any information that does not exactly match their own preconceptions. They are closely related to the “The I-Don’t-Want-To-Hear-That! User”: Userus headinsandia.

All in fun

Yes, it is possible to provide good customer service, take people seriously, and maintain a sense of humor at the same time. There are lots of wonderful people out there calling the help desk. These individuals have made the last 15 years of my career a pleasure. I have laughed and cried with users, shared their highs and lows, been shouted at, sworn at, threatened, praised, complimented, and commended. I have received unsolicited cards and small gifts on my birthday, as well as the ultimate compliment (being asked for by name).

Sadly, the nice users, who incidentally are by far the most common, don’t have much mileage in them when it comes to comedy. The ones we remember most are those who fill the help desk hall of shame. It should be remembered that there are two galleries in that particular edifice, callers and help desk workers. Perhaps one day I will start a complete classification of help desk analysts.

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