

By Jeff Dray

As an IT support professional, people routinely ask me to "help" then solve computer problems unrelated to my actual job. I like to help when and where I can, but there are serious pitfalls to accepting such requests. Providing free technical support is often not worth the price you pay, either as a recipient or as provider. This list outlines ten good reasons to avoid providing free technical support.

Avoid providing free tech support with one of these ten responses

Requests for free tech support often catch you off guard and your first instinct is to accept the task. But taking on a free support job is often a significant commitment and can be a real headache. When someone makes an unwelcome request for free tech support, use a response from [this list](#) to politely, yet firmly decline the job.

1 Time overload – Calls for technical support are often not confined to working hours; family, friends and vague acquaintances feel you operate a 24-hour service. Alleged friends call only until they need my help. If I'm not careful, I can work 40 hours a week for my employer, write for another 20 hours, provide free support for 20 hours, and have just enough time to eat and sleep--provided I can eat and sleep at the same time.

2 Shouldering the blame for future problems – When you fix a system, your "customer" often assigns you responsibility for anything that goes wrong in the world, from hard disk failures to their favorite politician losing the next election. Fixing a rogue application might appear to be a job's end, but customers are likely to blame any subsequent glitch on your fiddling.

3 Global support – Customers will ask you to support a huge variety of applications--many of which you will never had heard of, let alone used. Even if you profess complete ignorance and offer highly-general advice, the customer will likely hold you accountable for any mistaken guidance.

The best defense against this kind of query is to advise the requestor to consult the application vendor's Web site. When at work we know what applications we support and have the resources adequately respond. Many home users fail to realize that more applications exist than we have the time to study--even if we were being paid.

4 No Limit to Scope – I worked for a PC shop that offered free telephone support for the life of their products. I think this was an admirable practice, yet it made me keenly aware why companies charge for support. Most customers got along fine and only contacted us when a problem occurred with the equipment we supplied.

The problem came when a customer took us at our policy to the extreme, and called us with every technology problem he encountered, from a dirty mouse ball to a blown light bulb. He became such a nuisance that we asked the shop's owner to visit him and lay down the exact parameters of our support.

The owner properly agreed to our request and assumed he would accomplish the task within a half an hour. We didn't see him again until the next morning. Apparently, the customer had kept him talking until the early hours of the next day. Oh, how we laughed!

5 Transferable assets – Your services will be passed to subsequent equipment owners. I once offered to "see what I could do" for a system that had been donated to a friend of a friend. I sympathized with the individual's family, who was experiencing severe financial difficulty, and promised to make what I could out of an elderly system. I tinkered with the PC for hours and used many of my spare parts in the process. Ultimately, I managed to get the machine running reasonably well, freed up some hard disk space, and installed a working CD-ROM drive.

I received nothing for my efforts and didn't see the individual for several weeks. The next time I did see her, I asked how the PC was working and she airily replied, "Oh that! We sold it to our neighbor. We bought a new one from PC World." It also transpired that, along with the PC, the individual had sold my support services. The new owner had been duped and my name was mixed up with it, I was not a happy bunny.

Ten good reasons not to provide free tech support

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Devalues your services – The value that people place on goods and services is often a direct reflection of the price they pay. Many people will treat your free advice as valueless. Don't get me wrong, I am always happy to offer assistance to people who ask for it. In return I ask that they do not abuse my good nature.

You should place a value on your donated services by always sending the customer an invoice. The invoice should list the real cost of your service, but should be marked "Paid".

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Devalues your skills – This pitfall flows from Number 5. You make your living out of providing IT services, which gives your skills a value. If you don't respect that value, no one else will. Our tech vanity often convinces us that we can fix just about anything. This vanity is foolish. Yes, we should take pride in our work, but we must remember that IT work is profession, not a charity. When my local supermarket starts to give me free food I will look after their computers for nothing.

8

Exploitation – Thankfully, I have only experienced this once. A person who I knew only vaguely would regularly ask my advice on a wide range of IT related matters. Foolishly I made it a point of pride to answer all queries, spending a lot of time researching the answers. Imagine my surprise when I spotted him carrying system boxes from a van into a building. On the side of the van was the name of his computer repair and sales business, along with his Web site address.

I checked his site later that day and was horrified to see all my replies to his queries were in his FAQ section, along with the option to subscribe to his e-mail support service. I am slightly ashamed to say that, instead of confronting him about the situation and demanding appropriate recognition, my next piece of advice was highly destructive. After he was forced to refund a few customers I didn't hear from him again.

9

Hidden costs and liability – IT support is full of hidden costs and you should carefully consider those when donating your services and equipment. You may be happy to give away the spares in your tool box, you may also encounter a paying customer who could have used the parts you gave away in the vain attempt to impress that attractive neighbor.

One particularly expensive free support incident happened to a friend. He had taken home a printer that the owner was having trouble with. He plugged it in on his dining room table and switched the power on. The subsequent short circuit blew out all his fuses (he didn't have RCDs) and left a scorch mark on his new maple wood dining table. The coffee spill that was lurking at the bottom of the printer's case had moved to the power supply whilst in transit, and also left a stain on the back seat of his car. Far from being sorry for the trouble caused, the printer's owner demanded redress for the destruction of the machine.

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Customer may want the impossible – A client once requested a little extra, free support during a job I was already doing for him company. He was trying to circumvent his in house IT department and save himself a week of waiting and a cross-charge. He asked me to install a serial cable connection from a free standing PC to a device I was installing. The company network was running Windows 95 with no security, the free standing unit was running Windows 2000 and the user did not have admin rights. I had a difficult time explaining to the customer that I would have to request the appropriate access from his in-house techs.

Given the company's lax network security, I was surprised at the in-house IT department's vehement refusal to allow me access. As an alternative, I offered to connect our device to the networked Windows 95 PC. That did the trick. The in-house tech was down with us in 2 minutes! The client's free support request morphed into an expensive, emergency service call because the in-house techs were concerned I would compromise the network.



Jeff Dray has 15-years IT support and help desk experience. He currently works as a field engineer for Pitney Bowes in England and specializes in their IT products. He obtained his City and Guilds adult teaching certificate from Reading College where he served as help desk coordinator. Jeff also works as a freelance writer and is an avid sailing enthusiast.

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