

Keep It Personal!

© 2015 by Nick B. Nicholaou, all rights reserved

President, Ministry Business Services, Inc.

Reprinted from *Christian Computing Magazine*

True confession: My greatest IT challenge is not keeping up with technology! It's not budgeting the next upgrade! It is keeping my tone as warm and human as possible. And I think I may have a lot of company....

IT is Cool!

In fact, *cold* might be more accurate! I often want to respond quickly to requests— get in and get out— and often to the detriment of the quality of the relationships I have with those around me. Now, this is a 'faith' statement, because I really don't see it!

Recently my church small group discussed the question, "Why is it sometimes hard to show love to those around us?" Honestly, I couldn't think of anyone who I don't show love to! *Really!* So I asked my wife, suggesting that I couldn't think of anyone because it's a blind spot. She laughed and was shocked at my conundrum! Thankfully, she was able to help me by listing some quick and easy examples of those I don't show love to.

Why It's Such a Challenge

So I guess it's because this really is a blind spot to me! But I think many of us in IT may have the same blind spot— yours is probably just not as big a blind spot as mine.

I learned recently that I'm an introvert; I had no idea! I thought I was an extrovert! But my daughter was able to help me see the flaw in my thinking, and she was correct! And IT people tend to be introverts.

As an IT person, my tendency is to give someone the help they need as quickly and as efficiently as possible. I had always thought the reason was that I was trying to be efficient with *their* time; but now know that it's because I'm trying to be efficient with *my* time.

In her [11/7/2014 post in The Huffington Post](#), Alena Hall lists ten ways introverts interact differently with the world. Here's a quick summary:

1. They withdraw in crowds.
2. Small talk stresses them out, while deeper conversations keep them alive.
3. They succeed on stage— just not in the chit-chat afterwards.
4. They get distracted easily, but rarely feel bored.
5. They are naturally drawn to more creative, detail-oriented and solitary careers.
6. When surrounded by people, they locate themselves close to an exit.
7. They think before they speak.
8. They don't take on the mood of their environment like extroverts do.
9. They physically can't stand talking on the phone.
10. They literally shut down when it's time to be alone.

Okay, I own nine of those!

Why It Matters

Zig Zigler once said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." In John 13:34-35 Jesus told us, "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (NIV)

Putting those two together, we as IT people who tend to be introverts need to reach beyond our comfort zone and demonstrate how much we love and care. Resolving someone's tech support issue is important, but it's the way we say things and the warmth of our voice that lets them know we love them.

I obviously need to work on this more. But here are a few things I try to do to warm things up:

- *Make the call.* Email is helpful and efficient, but people need to hear my voice. So I try to call folks to help them or to follow up with them, even though it is less efficient.
- *Slow down.* People know I'm busy, and can probably tell I'm out of my comfort zone when talking through an issue. I try to slow the conversation down by asking them questions about details surrounding their issue and about how they're doing while working with them (So, what's the weather like there?).
- *Be available.* When we're done, I always try to remember to ask if there's anything else I can help them with while we're connected. Most of the time there isn't, but sometimes there is and I'll either take care of it or put a process in motion to get them the help they need.

Well, I hope it was okay to be so vulnerable. Maybe you can identify with some of my struggle, and maybe this article will help you love better too. Keeping it personal is part of how we love one another.

Nick Nicholaou is president of MBS, an IT consulting firm specializing in church and ministry computer networks, VoIP, and private cloud hosted services. You can reach Nick at nick@mbsinc.com, and may want to check out his firm's website (www.mbsinc.com) and his blog at <http://ministry-it.blogspot.com>.

Geek Speak!

© 2015 by Nick B. Nicholaou, all rights reserved
President, Ministry Business Services, Inc.
Reprinted from *MinistryTech Magazine*

Non-IT people are at the mercy of IT people who support them. Generally, folks don't like to admit they don't know what something means. But as IT people, we are over the top in our use of techno-terms and acronyms! And they can keep us from serving well!

Glazed Eyes

We IT people see it often. Someone asks why something works the way it does, or what caused a problem, and during our explanation we see their eyes glaze over. Really, they should ask us a clarifying follow-up question, like "What's a *VLAN*?" But they usually don't, perhaps because they figure they won't understand the explanation any more than they understood the original discussion point.

This makes non-IT people vulnerable to those who could take advantage of them if the opportunity was there. If they were in a store and talking to a salesperson, for example, who was trying to upsell them. Or a repair technician who had diagnosed the cause of a problem and wanted to add some tasks to the repair so they could upsell the labor in the repair ticket.

We're Different!

We IT people are different, perhaps because there is a constant flow of so many new terms and technologies. We ask about terms and technologies we don't know (or Google them) more often because it's the nature of the IT field.

When Blu-Ray was fairly new technology I was in the market to buy a player for our home theater. I went to a large store that catered to home theater equipment and also more normal equipment and asked the theater person what he recommended and why. Once he understood our setup he strongly recommended a \$650 player. Telling him I would consider it, I went to the normal equipment guy and asked the same question. He strongly recommended their \$70 in-store brand. I told him about the theater guy's recommendation and asked why the difference. He explained that the circuitry of the player is the same in every unit, but that some devices have additional technology that enhances their output. He also added that the enhancements were beyond human perception. I went back to the theater guy, told him why I was thinking of buying the inexpensive unit, and he agreed that the great specs of the \$650 player were beyond our ability to perceive!

How To Be *Even More Different!*

As a technology person, conduct yourself in every support conversation as though you're talking with someone who doesn't understand much technology beyond mouse and keyboard terms. Even when someone tries to impress you with their technical knowledge, keep it simple. Here are some rules I try to apply that make a difference:

- Avoid all acronyms whenever possible. Even if they seem like they're ones everyone knows, just don't do it!
- When I hear a slip I've made because I've used an acronym, take the time to briefly and simply define it. Brief and simple is the rule.

- Try to always couch the response in context. It gives the person on the other end of the conversation time to get a little momentum in following my overall response.
- Always follow up by giving them an opportunity to ask clarifying questions. A good way to start that is by saying something like, "That was a lot of technical talk (or geek-speak). My guess is that some of the terms may have been unfamiliar to you, so please: ask questions."
- End every support conversation/ opportunity by asking if there's anything else I can help them with while they've got my attention. I do this because I know that as an IT person—especially an *engineering* type of IT person—I've probably come across as though I'm in a hurry.

These rules will help you be the kind of IT person people love and revere, rather than just revere. In The Church that's important!

Are You On A Team?

Even if you are a lone IT person at your church, there will come a day when you are no longer there. Hopefully that day will be because you have graduated to Heaven! But we should always take the extra time to conduct ourselves as though we are on a team. What exactly does that mean?

When you are sending emails to help support someone who uses your system, always include the context of your response to them. That's important because someone else trying to step in might not know why you sent some specific information or responded the way you did! The fastest way to do that is to begin your response with something like this: *Following up on our conversation, here's the information I promised to send.* That will go a long way towards helping others you may be serving with or who may need to follow you.

Finally...

We have a client whose IT person was suddenly called Home. The unfortunate thing is that he never made time to document their system. So duplicate funds have had to be spent to purchase licenses, etc. If you're on a church staff, talk with the person you report to and ask for permission to block out 3-4 hours one day each week for one month to ignore all support requests while you work on documenting your system. It will be a great way to serve your team, and a totally worthwhile focus.

Nick Nicholaou is president of MBS, an IT consulting firm specializing in church and ministry computer networks, VoIP, and private cloud hosted services. You can reach Nick at nick@mbsinc.com, and may want to check out his firm's website (www.mbsinc.com) and his blog at <http://ministry-it.blogspot.com>.

What Role Does IT Play in Your Ministry?

© 2012 by Nick B. Nicholaou, all rights reserved

President, Ministry Business Services, Inc.

Reprinted from *Christian Computing Magazine*

There was a day when computers had little-to-no role in churches and ministries. But today, they play a very crucial role, helping fulfill nearly every aspect of our ministry calling! Most church and ministry leadership teams are unaware of how visions cast and implementations planned affect or are affected by their computer systems. Let's look at how leadership can improve this process and achieve more successful results.

The Situation

There are very few church and ministry departments that are not completely dependent on their computers today. From worship to education; preaching to maintenance; environmental systems (HVAC) to parking lots—all depend heavily on computers today. And while that's true, it's also true that churches and ministries often find themselves having to overcome last minute new-initiative challenges due to their computer systems.

The Dilemma

Herein lies the problem: while most for-profit organizations invite their chief technologist (Network Administrator, IT Director, etc) to the leadership table, most not-for-profits still do not. So in churches and ministries, when vision is cast and plans are formulated that rely on technology, those casting and planning aren't getting the input they need to ensure a successful launch of their new initiatives. And their chief technologist is often unaware that a change is coming that will need to be accommodated and whose needs require more than what the current system can deliver. The result is last minute adjustments that must be made and that compromise the potential high-quality and reasonable-costs that could have been accomplished.

So, why do churches and ministries continue this disconnect that adds so much stress to all involved in their new initiatives?

One of the reasons the chief technologist on their teams is not invited to the vision-casting and implementation-planning leadership table is that the chief technologist role is usually not seen as a ministry role. The person filling it rarely has a ministry credential, and the role itself is a somewhat secular function.

But if asked, the person in that role most likely feels strongly that it *is* a ministry, and that their function on the team is their ministry to the Lord! And, if pressed, leadership probably feels the person in that role *should* be performing their duties as a ministry in service to God.

Possible Solutions

The best solution is to adopt what corporate America has found to work best. They invite their chief technologist to sit in leadership meetings where vision is cast and implementation plans made; even if only as an observing/ non-voting participant. This ensures that as vision is cast and implementation plans are made that both can be adjusted as necessary to take full advantage of current computer systems and capabilities. It also ensures that your computer system, if it needs to be upgraded or enhanced, can be ready when needed.

The second-best solution is to have another member of the leadership team who is very technology savvy and who fully understands your computer systems well fulfill that roll.

- This is more than someone who knows how to use Word and PowerPoint or Excel well; it is a person who is a technologist of some sort.
- If there is a member of your board or pastoral/ leadership team that can do that well, this option can work. The challenge with this second-best solution is communication: details may not always get communicated to the chief technologist in a timely manner.
- If you find that this option doesn't deliver the results needed over time, it may need to be adjusted or abandoned in favor of the best solution.

The third-best solution is to have your chief technologist's supervisor fulfill that role.

- The same challenge in the second-best solution exists in this solution; that of timely communication.
- An additional challenge often exists with this option: the supervisor may not be as technically savvy and may not fully understand your computer systems.
- Again, if you find that this option doesn't deliver the results needed over time, it may need to be adjusted or abandoned in favor of the best solution.

The worst possible solution is to continue to cast vision and make implementation plans without the input and involvement of your chief technologist.

Involving your IT person— your chief technologist— in your strategic processes early on will help shape your strategies in ways that will facilitate greater success. Though it may feel a little risky and may need some adjustments along the way, doing so will be good for your church or ministry.

Nick Nicholaou is president of MBS, a consulting firm specializing in church and ministry IT and CPA services. You can reach Nick via email (nick@mbsinc.com) and may want to check out his firm's website (www.mbsinc.com) and his blog at <http://ministry-it.blogspot.com>.

Why Churches Change ChMS Providers

© 2014 by Nick B. Nicholaou, all rights reserved

President, Ministry Business Services, Inc.

Reprinted from *Christian Computing Magazine*

Churches change solutions of various kinds often, and those changes cost money and time. Sometimes the changes are needed, but sometimes not! So how can you tell? We all want to be good stewards of the resources given us to accomplish our ministries, so let's explore this further.

A Brief Story to Get Us Going

We felt called to serve The Church in the mid-1980s to help them with their administrative and operational needs. One of our first decisions was to write a database and accounting solution because there "must not be anything good available." I'm glad we crossed the path of a ChMS provider who challenged us to research what *is* available before pursuing that task. As I've written in my annual ChMS article, we discovered there were already more than 200 providers! And some of them are *very* thorough and good. So, instead of creating yet another ChMS, we did our first ChMS article research to identify the leaders of the pack and find solutions we could recommend.

It's Human Nature

When we inherit a solution of any kind we tend to look at it as suspect. Maybe it's an American cultural thing in that we don't like being told we have to use something we didn't personally choose to use, or that we don't want to do something we didn't personally choose to do. We often think that because something wasn't our choice, it should probably be replaced.

This is probably the second most common reason why churches change ChMSes. (I wrote an article a couple of months ago on the most common reason—I'll tell you what it was again a few paragraphs further on in this article.) It can be at an individual or a departmental level. It can be caused by previous workplace experience, or by hearing that another respected church uses a different solution. Regardless, it's a bias that can have a large price tag.

Horizontal Comparisons

We often hear from our pulpits that when we focus on The Lord, we are better off than when we focus on our surroundings or on what others have. This is true in the area of churches comparing solutions too! Bear with me, and you'll see what I mean.

Many churches change their software solutions because they learn that another church is using something different. This is probably the third most common reason

why churches change ChMSes. There can be two problems with this line of thinking:

1. Having worked with so many hundreds of churches over the years, I've observed that most churches do most of the same kinds of operational tasks, but do them differently. These differences in accomplishing similar tasks are due to differences in staff and personalities, budgets and capacities, and/ or chosen business practices. These aren't necessarily right vs wrong issues (though they sometimes can be legal issues!), these are *style* differences. Different software solutions can tend to work better in some organizations because of those intangible style differences. So changing to a solution because another church is using it can sometimes fail because of those style differences.
2. A mistake churches often make when looking at what solutions other churches have implemented is they assume those other churches did their own due diligence in approaching their decision to select a solution, and that they did it well. But it's more often true that those other churches allowed their decisions to be heavily influenced by what other churches were using and never did very deep research and analysis in their decision-making process! That means your church, when basing a decision on what another church decided, may be making a decision that has been passed down from church to church and that was never originally researched at all!

What Should You Do?

All of us in ministry want to be as productive as possible and are glad when we can save time on projects like choosing a ChMS. I get that, and agree with it! Believing things can improve and getting recommendations from other churches are good things! So, how do you avoid the bad decisions and their resulting expense – both monetary and in lost production (unavoidable during a software transition) – when considering changing ChMSes?

1. Don't assume that what you've got is bad just because you don't understand it or feel like it's too complex. Check with the ChMS provider and do your research!

- Make certain you're using their most recent version, and that you have all of the optional modules necessary to meet your church's needs. That means helping the ChMS provider understand what you want to accomplish and where you *feel the pain* when using their solution.
 - Determine if training (the neglect of which is the most common reason churches change ChMS providers) would help you and your team.
 - Ask for a list of other churches that are similar to yours in ministry style and size so you can call them and see if they're happy or unhappy with the solution. If they're unhappy with it, ask them what they're doing to overcome that and decide if you think they're doing their due diligence.
2. If you're going to pursue a new ChMS, do your research!
 - Decide to make your search for a solution larger than just your department's needs. The best solutions are those that help your church benefit from the synergy of being a church-wide solution. With appropriate church leadership approval to spend time researching, meet with people in each department and ask them what features they like and depend on in your current ChMS, what they don't like about the current ChMS, and what additional features they'd like in a new ChMS.
 - Create a needs list of features based on your time with your church team members and run it by appropriate church leadership to ensure that it's accurate. Then put it in a format you can send to prospective ChMS providers so they can say 'yes' or 'no' on each of the needs you have listed.
 - Look at published ChMS lists and send the needs list to each ChMS provider— including your current ChMS provider.
 - Invite the three highest-scoring ChMS providers to come to your

church and do a demonstration of their software to your entire team. Make certain the providers know the length of time they and the other two will each have (I recommend three hours, and anticipate that each will say they'd like more than that) and what items you'd like them to talk about and demonstrate. This will help your staff compare them more objectively.

- Debrief your team after each demo, asking the same questions. At the end of the debrief ask each to score the provider from one to five.
- After the third debrief take a short break. Then come back and let the team talk through which ChMS they believe will best meet the needs of your church. Make certain each person contributes to the discussion, and then conclude with a vote.

That process may seem like a lot of work, and it is! That's the *due diligence* that most are not willing to do! But we've done that for many Christian churches and ministries, and the results are surprisingly good in many respects:

- Higher team buy-in,
- Greater momentum into and through the change process, and
- Choosing a solution that is a best fit and will stay in place longer.

Nick Nicolaou is president of MBS, an IT consulting firm specializing in church and ministry computer networks, VoIP, and private cloud hosted services. You can reach Nick at nick@mbsinc.com, and may want to check out his firm's website (www.mbsinc.com) and his blog at <http://ministry-it.blogspot.com>.

Transitioning to VoIP – Our Experience

© 2011 by Nick B. Nicholaou, all rights reserved

President, Ministry Business Services, Inc.

Reprinted from *Christian Computing Magazine*

We decided to transition our organization to a VoIP phone system a couple of years ago. We're glad we did—doing so saved us a lot of money and improved our work processes. We learned some things along the way that were not readily apparent, though. They may help you whether you've already implemented VoIP or are just considering doing so.

What Is VoIP?

VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) systems communicate via IP rather than over traditional phone lines (known as PSTN, an acronym for Public Switched Telephone Network). The size of the cable plug is the most obvious difference to most phone system users.

Most people think of VoIP as how their phone connects to the world. While that can be true, it doesn't have to be. There are generally four possibilities:

1. *PSTN Inside & Out.* A traditional phone system inside that connects beyond your building over traditional phone lines.
2. *VoIP Inside & PSTN Out.* A VoIP phone system inside that connects beyond your building over traditional phone lines.
3. *VoIP Inside & Out.* A VoIP phone system inside that connects beyond your building over the Internet.
4. *PSTN Inside & VoIP Out.* A traditional phone system inside that connects beyond your building over the Internet.

We started out as PSTN inside and out, changed to VoIP inside and PSTN out, and finally landed on VoIP inside and out. The savings we experienced after our last change has been optimal, and the quality of service has been the same as we had with our original total PSTN system.

What Does a VoIP PBX Cost?

New phone systems typically cost in the tens of thousands. I was surprised when researching VoIP phone systems that they can either be in that same price range, or they can be free! Free to me is a caution sign... I know free systems are not usually worth as much as they cost. I was surprised and pleased to learn that free VoIP phone systems are different!

VoIP phone systems have become so commonplace that they are now available in Open Source form. *That's* why they can be free. My skeptical nature caused me to research this area, and I was surprised to learn that some of the free systems are as full-featured and reliable as those that cost a lot of money. So, though I was still skeptical—*but hopeful!*—we decided to take the plunge.

We decided on the Elastix system. It's built on a very reliable technology platform (Asterisk by Digium), but has an easy-to-use interface. The cost: totally free! But we're data pros; not phone pros, so we hired www.InnoCloud.com to configure it. We spent a little on them, but that was all!

What About Handsets?

We had a bit of a problem to solve regarding handsets (the telephones that sit on your desk). VoIP natively runs over Ethernet cable, and we didn't have extra cable runs to each of our desks to accommodate VoIP phones. I didn't want to spend the money to run additional cable.

Many make the mistake of connecting their computers (which want to communicate at 1000mbps, or gigabit) through their VoIP handsets, but most are unwilling to buy gigabit handsets. So they connect their computers through less expensive 100mbps or 10mbps VoIP phones. That slows down the computers to the speed of the phone.

So we decided to do the opposite. We connected our phones through our computers! We bought Bria softphones—software that runs on our computers instead of having physical handsets. We use headsets—wired and wireless—instead of handsets. To be honest, I wasn't sure all of our team members would like that change, but I was surprised! Those who I anticipated liking the headsets the least were those who ended up liking them the most!

How Does It Save Money?

Beyond the potential savings of the phone system itself, it's possible to save lots on your connection beyond your buildings too. Our final step was to convert from PSTN lines to SIP trunks. SIP, or Session Initiation Protocol connections are VoIP services offered by Internet telephony service providers that connect a company's phone system to the PSTN via the Internet.

Changing from PSTN to SIP trunks cut our monthly phone bill by about 60%.

How Does It Compare?

I've already mentioned how VoIP systems cost so much less to initiate and maintain, and that the quality of service is as good as what we experienced over traditional phone lines. It has all of the usual phone system options (voicemail, transfers, call groups, etc), but it has an additional option that we find indispensable.

Many of our team work away from our office. In fact, our team of engineers are spread throughout the country! With our Elastix system over SIP and using Bria softphones, our team members can 'log in' to our phone system from anywhere and are then treated by the system as though they are just down the hall! Each has an extension and is able to work as though they were on-site rather than off-site.

VoIP has come a long way since folks first started getting excited about it in the 1990s. It is stable, high quality, and cost effective. It is definitely good stewardship.

Nick Nicholaou is president of MBS, a consulting firm specializing in church and ministry IT and CPA services. You can reach Nick via email (nick@mbsinc.com) and may want to check out his firm's website (www.mbsinc.com) and his blog at <http://ministry-it.blogspot.com>.

“...freeing those in ministry from business distractions.”

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH: Nick B. Nicholaou

Nick Nicholaou is President of MBS, Inc., a team of IT strategists who evaluate, engineer, and support servers, Mac & Windows computers, and mobile devices. In MBS' private cloud datacenter they host Exchange email, SQL databases, VoIP phone systems, SPAM filtering, and file storage/ synchronization.

While in executive service for the auto manufacturing industry, he and his wife Grace sensed God's call to found MBS. Since 1986 Nick and his team have focused on serving Christian churches and ministries nationwide. His specific areas of expertise include organizational management, crisis resolution, and strategic implementation of technology.

Nick has been honored by:

- The Church Network, inducting him into their Hall of Fame.
- Christian Leadership Alliance for his role in assisting ministries nationwide.
- Christian Leadership Alliance with their Distinguished Service Award for excellence in serving ministries.

Nick has been published in print hundreds of times.

- In books
 - Church Finance
 - Business Management in the Local Church
 - The Church Leader's Answer Book
 - Church and Nonprofit Organization Tax & Financial Guide (1999 - 2007 editions)
 - Saving Money And Buying Smart
 - Leadership Handbooks of Practical Theology, Volume 3
- Quoted in ZiffDavis' *eWeek* and *LAN Times*
- In journals
 - *Christian Computing Magazine*
 - CTI's *Christianity Today*, *Leadership Journal*, and *Your Church Magazines*
 - NACBA's *Ledger* and *Insight Magazines*
 - ECFA's *Focus*
 - CLA's *CMA Report* and *Outcomes Magazines*
 - *The Clergy Journal*
 - *Church Business*

He has been interviewed on syndicated radio and podcasts, and is a former member of the ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability) Standards Committee.



Nick and his team have served thousands of Christian churches and ministries nationally, and he speaks on a regular basis at national and regional conferences from coast to coast.

Nick's Contact Info:
714.840.5900, x525
nick@mbsinc.com

Blog: <http://ministry-it.blogspot.com>
Website: www.mbsinc.com