



Computer SOS

Caption[piano & orchestral fanfare]
[deep roll of thunder& crackling of lightning]
[synthesizer playsin bright rhythm & tone]
[ringing] Hello! Hello!(man) radio's outstanding...

Susan: Hello and welcome to "Tech Talk" from the University of Minnesota, your source of information about the technology that surrounds us. I'm your host, Susan McKinnell. Everybody needs a little help sometimes. This is especially true for home computer users and today we're spending the whole show talking about help; where to look for information to fix it yourself and how to know when it's time to throw in the towel and call for support. Some of the terms you'll hear include: search engine, news groups, system restore and remote desktop. Our first guest today is Eric Bajuneimi. Eric is a help line and training consultant with ADCS, here at the University of Minnesota, beyond that he has 8 years of IT experience in the health care, airline, printing, and banking industries. He is also a martial arts practitioner and instructor! Thanks so much for being here today, Eric.

Eric: I'm here to help.

Susan: Why do so many people have problems with their computers?

Eric: Well, there's a lot of different components in computers. You have software, hardware, a lot of different pieces that can go wrong. So there's always a chance that something's gonna go haywire.

Susan: So, when people get frustrated, it's not because they might have a lemon. It might be because it's such a complex machine.

Eric: Right. You didn't buy a bad computer. You just have a lot of pieces to take into consideration that could go wrong.

Susan: It seems to me that most programs have some sort of built-in help. Is that true? Is that a good place to start looking if you have problems?

Eric: It's usually your best first choice to look and see if the answer that you need is in that help. The only problem with those help files is sometimes they're not written by good technical people, or by technical writers, I should say, more often than not they're written by the people that are developing the software. And so when they write an answer, it's not always a clear answer. It's something that they understand, but something that a common user won't understand.

Susan: They've been working with the program for years and years and may not have...

Eric: Right.

Susan:...the novice perspective that someone else has. That's why it can be so frustrating sometimes.

Eric: Right, very true.

Susan: What is one of your first lines of defense? What do you usually do if you start to have problems with a computer?

Eric: Well, even as a support professional, I get error messages that I've never seen before. It happens all the time. So I tend to go to search engines first off. Goggle is usually my favorite. They have really a lot of results that show up. It's very easy to find. I shouldn't say easy to find.

[susan laughs]

Eric: There's usually a lot of people out there that have experienced what you're experiencing; the error message that you've had. So a lot of times if you plug in the message that you get on your computer, assuming that you still have internet access, you can usually get a result that will show you that same error message. And usually there's people that have experienced that, and they'll sometimes guide you through the steps to fix it.

Susan: Okay, or perhaps if you don't have internet access, maybe you can write it down and take it to someplace, a cafe that has it or library or...

Eric: Right, a friend's house; whatever.

Susan: So you just plunk in the error message. Could we take a look at trying that out?

Eric: Sure.

Susan: I think we've got an error message in Google right that I recently saw on a computer, and it's really obtuse. It's just stop and then a bunch of numbers. I have no idea what that means.

Eric: Very commonly the error messages are archaic, and who knows what they mean; only Microsoft would know. If you go to Google and enter into the search field you get a list of results that match whatever that error message was. And the first one that we see here, of course, is from Microsoft themselves. So that's probably a good place to start;

Susan: That should be a reliable source.

Eric: Uh-huh. So if you click on that link, it'll bring you to a page that explains what the error was, what might have happened. It's not always exactly what happened.

Susan: And this, you know to me, a lot of this may not mean a lot to a novice user. It's talking about a registry hive and unbootable and whatever, but I mean is that okay?

Eric: Yeah. A lot of times there's a lot of terminology in there that you won't understand, but for the most part you can see what the symptoms were and they'll sometimes tell you what the cause is, and

then they'll give you a resolution. So just hold down and look at the resolution and click on-- there's usually links that they that you can go to. For this one they say you need to obtain the latest service pack.

Susan: and that's just a download and install, isn't it? So that should be pretty easy for anyone to do.

Eric: Uh-huh. And they step you through everything and tell you how to do the installation, and hopefully that will resolve your problem.

Susan: Really something that most users could do on their own. That's fabulous!

Eric: Simple solution. It's not always that simple, but that's an excellent place to start.

Susan: If you don't get an error message, could you still use a search engine to look for some help, I mean, sometimes things just go wrong, right?

Eric: And you can put in generic terms about what kind of problem you're having. I mean if you're not, if something's not working in a particular program you're using or you're trying to do a particular sequence of things in a program, you can always go into goggle and say this is what I want to try to door this is the problem I'm having. Sometimes you get good results. Sometimes you won't get such good results.

Susan: Now obviously if it takes me to Microsoft or Apple's website I would know that that would be a good place, a good resource that's going to give me a good answer. But you said sometimes you get answers from other users. What sort of websites are they using that we're talking about?

Eric: Usually those are news groups or boards where people have posted answers, discussions boards. And people use those a lot for troubleshooting, and it's basically--sometimes it's normal everyday users turning to people who know that would have that specific knowledge. And sometimes it's experts asking experts, and you can get a lot of good information from those discussion boards and news groups. You can do it in Google. There's a news group search capability so you can search the news groups and look for information.

Susan: Is that something that we can look at real quick on here? Is it from the main Google page?

Eric: Yep. In fact, if you type in what you want to search for, and there's a groups link right here, and if you click on groups--there's another button here that says "search groups," and it'll give you the same results. Usually when you search the groups, you're gonna get results that pertain to discussions about that particular error, people that have posted messages.

Susan: Okay and I can see right here, this one is still from Microsoft but obviously it's from a public part.

Eric: Right. That's from a news group that deals specifically with Windows XP.

Susan: So these are other users who are putting up stuff? Because it's a news group, it's not going to look like--we were looking at a knowledge-base article with step-by-step this is what you're supposed to do, but it's going to have kind of a different layout to the page?

Eric: Right. It'll usually be a post that someone says I got this error message, what do I do? Someone else will post another reply that says, you know, this is what I did, and it worked or this is what I tried, and it didn't work. So it's a real step-by-step process.

Susan: Process of elimination--one of the wonderful things about the internet is everyone out there helping each other. Fabulous! Now I know that Windows has some built-in, some other things that you might be able to use if you have problems specifically with Windows. What are some of the things that you use? Are there any tools in windows itself if you're having Windows problems?

Eric: Specific to Windows XP, they have a really nice thing built in. It's called "system restore." So, let's say you install a piece of software and something goes wrong after you install that software and you don't know exactly what the problem is, but you can narrow it down to "I installed a piece of software, now I have a problem."

Susan: Which is fairly frequent, when we do start having problems, it's because you have specifically installed something.

Eric: Right. So you realize, okay, it must be the software that I installed, or whatever I did, that made the change that's causing the problem. So if you go into the help and support. It's on the start menu and there's a help and support link right here.

Susan: Now that's also where you'd go to if you had, like we talked earlier a little bit about how many programs have their own built-in help. So Windows if you had a question that you knew it was a Windows problem, you can go right into here and there's a search in the upper left.

Eric: Yep. You can do a search for whatever problem you have. But if you go to the system restore, the link that's over here, what it'll do is it'll open up the system restore wizard, and it'll basically step you through the process of going back to a point before you installed whatever it was that you installed or whatever change you made.

Susan: OK. So it would remove the program that you did install?

Eric: Yes, and it won't touch anything else. It'll leave your documents and your other...but it'll go back before that point and take away whatever change you made. And it periodically makes updates to that. Where it stores those backups, and so there are marker files and you'll see, if you go through the wizard, you'll see a little calendar that says this is the day it made a backup. You can step back to whatever day it was that it was working okay, and hopefully when you restore it from that point, it'll be okay after that.

Susan: It'll be working again. So again, it's kind of like a backup of your system, but it's just of windows. It's not of any of your files or anything like that? So you wouldn't want to use this to recover a file that you've lost?

Eric: No. This is strictly for system settings and basically the environment that you're working

Susan: The windows operating system. Right. Fabulous! And it's as easy as just looking at a... and picking that date and saying let's go back to that date, and see if that's working, okay?

Eric: Yup. It's a nice wizard form. The nice thing about XP is they did wizards for just about everything, so it's real simple. It steps you through the process, and it'll tell you if you need a reboot or if it's back to the way it should be. It walks you through the whole thing.

Susan: So, software manufacturers really are trying to make it so that people can help themselves?

Eric: Uh-huh.

Susan: Now, I wanna go just a little bit back to the fact that this is the Windows help and support center. Macintosh operating system has a very similar feature, doesn't it?

Eric: Yeah. A lot of time I go to the web. I go to Mac's web site, Apple's web site, apple.com, I check their-- they have a little support link up there and that's usually the best resource. They also have discussion boards specifically for Mac operating systems and hardware.

Susan: Is that happening more often that the built-in support that you may have with the software that is on your computer is perhaps not as good as the stuff that you might find on the web?

Eric: Yeah. A lot of times the built-in help will only get you so far because they don't include really specific information. So if you go to the web, you know, hop onto their web site, you can get much more detailed information, and again with the discussions, you can get other people that have better input than just from the company.

Susan: So, if the software company themselves are perhaps not dealing with a particular problem you might have other uses for. And then, of course, I would assume, too, the other thing is that the built-in help came with your software when ever you purchased it which may be a year or 2 or 3 years old, whereas hopefully they're updating what's on the web site.

Eric: Right. Out-of-date is a big problem with applications.

Susan: Yeah, and if you're getting updates to your the problem might be completely new and different. Fabulous! If these basic steps; checking the software web site or going to a search engine is not getting you anywhere, what is the next thing to start to try and figure out what your problem is?

Eric: You want to narrow it down, of course, to whatever specific; is it software, is it hardware piece, is it the operating system that's having a problem. So you want to do your best to find out the specific piece that is the problem, and then from there, you're going to want to contact whatever vendor it is that provided that piece. So if it's Apple, say you have an Apple laptop, and there's a problem with a specific piece of your CD-ROM drive doesn't work, your modem doesn't work, you're gonna want to call Apple directly and try to work with them. If it's under warranty; check all that stuff. If it's software; if it's a particular piece of... then you're gonna want to contact whoever it is that made that software, and try to get as much if you're gonna have to pay for support or if they provide some level of free support.

Susan: So that's the step where you want to start going beyond what you can do yourself? Yes. Thank you so much, Eric! So the first place you should look for help is your favorite search engine. But at some point, you still might need to make a call for outside assistance. So what can you do to make that experience less frustrating? Let's find out! Joining me today is Alexander Saint Croix. He graduated in 2003 from the University of Minnesota with a degree in English and

an emphasis on writing poetry. He now works for the University as a help line and training consultant. Thanks for being back with us today, Alex.

Alex: My pleasure!

Susan: Alex, who do you call for computer support?

Alex: Well, it depends on what problem you're having. You obviously wouldn't call Apple for a Microsoft support question, and you wouldn't Microsoft for an apple question. And so you have to find out, narrow down the problem, exactly who can give you support, and knowing that just for starters can help you get on the right track.

Susan: How do you start to narrow things--I mean sometimes they can be so hard to tell what, where a problem starts and ends and what exactly is the root cause.

Alex: Well, a general thing that you can do is you can do a little bit of research on your own just to kind of narrow down your list of suspects until you have a handful of them. And maybe if you call one place, a lot of times what'll happen is they'll determine after a few minutes that it's not something that has anything to do with their product, but they might tell you to call somebody else, and so you might get bounced around a couple times until you narrow it down.

Susan: That can be very frustrating, but getting bounced doesn't necessarily mean that they're trying to pass the buck. It really can be a valid thing. that it's a problem they can't solve.

Alex: It's just sideways progress!

Susan: Sounds like a good thing!

Alex: Yes. So the more research you do up front, and the more you know about your problem, the faster you can get through that.

Susan: So even if you're not the type of person who really wants to do self-help, doing some of the things that I talked about with Eric, Googling your problem and that kind of thing, really can be helpful even if you're going to ask for outside help?

Alex. It can save you time and frustration on the phone.

Susan: Which is always a good thing. We know that calling a help line can really take a long time.

Alex: It can. It can be especially frustrating if you spend 20 minutes waiting on help just to find out that you were on the wrong track to begin with,

Susan: And you need to call someone else.

Alex: The more work you can do up front the better.

Susan: Okay. So, in addition to trying to figure out what the cause of your problem is, which software package what are some other tips and tricks that might help a person kind of assuage that frustration on the phone.

Alex: Well, some of the things that they can do are very, very common sense. Make sure that you have everything that you need to sit on the phone for potentially 30 minutes. You know, if you're hungry, grab something to eat really quick, get some water, go to the restroom, whatever you need to do to actually sit down and feel comfortable. Because if you have to leave in like 5 minutes, it might not be the best time to get on the phone, have to end a call and then start over from scratch.

Susan: Absolutely! I actually had an experience not that when the battery on my cordless phone ran out

Alex: Make sure your batteries are charged.

Susan: Okay, so getting a little something to drink and so forth. What about the problem itself? I've been trying to look and see where my problem might start, but is there any other than trying to Google it and so forth--do I want to be taking any notes, anything like that?

Alex: Absolutely! You're going to need to have a notepad. You're going to need a pen to write things down with, a table preferably to sit down at so that you can write things down. So if you're doing this on the cell phone in the alleyway, writing down the notes on the back of a receipt, that's probably not where you wanna be. So go to an office, sit down, get comfortable, plan to be there for a little while because if it's worth doing, it's worth doing once, correctly the first time.

Susan: Absolutely, and maybe something else to keep you occupied while you're waiting on hold.

Alex: Rubik's cube!

Susan: (laughs) A magazine or something.

Alex: Sure, yeah.

Susan: Absolutely. As far as taking notes, is there any information other than, you know, obviously what happened or what the problem is? Is there any other information that I'd want to be able to provide to the person on the phone?

Alex: The manufacturer of the computer, if you have a computer problem. The name and the version of the software that you're using, if there were any specific error messages, write them down word for word.

Susan: Okay, let's go back a little bit. the manufacturer of the computer. so I'd want to be able to say if it's Apple, Dell, Gateway, whatever.

Alex: Exactly. You're going to need to know the software. So, for example, you wanna know, if it's an email problem, for example, and you're using Microsoft outlook, you'll wanna that it's outlook 2003. It came with office 2003.

Susan: how do I find out that kind of information? I mean, a lot of people don't know what they're using

Alex: A lot of programs have a help menu up in the top right. Most programs have a help menu you can go into, and there's a little menu that drops down, and it'll say "about" and then whatever the name of the piece of software is." about Outlook" "about Outlook", and you can go in there, it'll tell you the version and everything like that. You need to know what operating system you're using. So if it's Windows XP, Apple OS 10, 10.2, or something. You need to know what the different versions are. So these are all baseline things that you should know about your software just to begin with. Because if you have a problem with anything, then you have that information. It might not be a bad idea to make a list of what you have. Spend an hour, do some investigation sometime when you have some free time to do it. And then just keep that list near your computer so you don't have to go look it up when you're under the gun.

Susan: Absolutely as a preventative thing I would think when you buy your computer.

Alex: Ask the person who sells it to you. You can just write it downright then and there and whenever you install new software.

Susan: Because when you install it the first time, it's going right up front for you what version it is.

Alex: It'll have a label.

Susan: Just write it down and keep a list of the things that you've actually installed in your computer in one spot right next to your computer. What about things like disks or software or you know.

Alex: A lot of people actually will take those disks, and they'll put them into a cabinet near their computer so the installation disks for all the software, for the operating system, all that stuff. They'll keep it right next to the machine somewhere, somewhere in the same room. The last thing you want to do is to pack that into a box and put it into the attic and then 3 years later, you have to go dig around in the attic to find a disk before you can get telephone support. That's not a good feeling. Another really important thing to do is to write down the serial numbers for the disks that you install. If you have software like Microsoft windows, it comes with a serial number.

Susan: That's the product key and you frequently had to put that in when you were installing something .

Alex: Exactly. And a lot of times on telephone support, they'll ask you for product keys in order to find out whether or not you actually purchased the software or if you got it from somewhere else.

Susan: One of the things about calling someone on the phone. It can be very frustrating when you're calling someone, and they ask a lot of questions and want a lot of stuff. And obviously making these lists beforehand can be very good. But, give me a little bit of the perspective. You've been answering the phone for a long time. What's it like when you're answering the phone?

Alex: well, one thing that people don't really think about is that the person on the other side of the phone, they can't see your screen. They can't see what you're looking at. A lot of times they're sitting therewith their eyes closed trying to imagine what exactly you're seeing and reciting from memory what these menus are. So if they get something a little bit wrong--if it's a little bit off--if you click on return, and they say enter or something like that, it's just because they're trying to keep all these different systems straight.

Susan: and they might not have it right in front of them.

Alex: Exactly. And the other thing too is that you don't know what they were just on the phone doing 5 minutes before you they might have been solving a totally different problem with something totally different, and they might have something else on their mind so it takes a little bit of time to switch gears. They're gonna ask you a lot of questions so that they can start to narrow down their own list of suspects. And another thing is that they're just people like you and me. So they don't know all of the answers to everything.

Susan: There isn't a person who knows all the computer answers in the world?

Alex: A lot of times what they're doing is looking stuff upon the internet while you're talking, trying to find out anything they can find out while you're giving them more and more details.

Susan: They're going to the search engines and the forums for you,

Alex: Exactly! So it's something to bear in mind. You want to be patient with them. They didn't cause the problem. They're just trying to help you fix it. That's something to keep in mind.

Susan: I know a lot of people by the time they're making the call can be really frustrated with a problem, and it's hard not to kind of, you know, vent that frustration to the first person you get on the phone.

Alex: Exactly. And something that a lot of very nice people will say, I'm very frustrated. I know that you didn't cause this problem, but I just want to convey my frustration and a lot of times the technical person on the phone can let you do that, and it's not too much of an issue. But it's polite and courteous not to direct that anger at them.

Susan: And perhaps you might get a little better technical support if you don't.

Alex: Ah, generally, yeah.

Susan: Unless someone really likes to be vented upon.

Alex: well it's just if they get nervous, then they're not thinking clearly and straight either. So if you make them nervous, they're not gonna be able to help you as well.

Susan: And as much as companies may not want to hear your poor experiences, there usually are other avenues for proper complaints.

Alex: Exactly. There are lots of companies that will put a comment box on their web site or something like that so you can go there and fill out product reviews and customer feedback forms and things like that. So if the quality of the service on the telephone line is substandard, then that's something that you probably want to either talk to the technician with or maybe talk to their manager. Ask if you can talk to somebody above them and communicate that. The best thing to do, the best policy is to be patient and courteous because these people are trying to help you.

Susan: So if you wanna get them to help you, it's good to be nice to them.

Alex: That's right.

Susan: Okay. So to be prepared, you want to get everything you need in advance, be prepared to for awhile because we all know it can take awhile. What about some other avenues? We've been talking about phone support. I see a lot of companies are offering chat support online. Is that something that works just as well?

Alex: Absolutely! In fact, what a lot of places will do is, they'll have a chat window on their web site, and you can go to it to initiate a conversation with a consultant. That consultant might then pick up a phone and give and then while they're describing things to you, for example, a web page that they want you to go to, instead of spelling it out over what might be a bad telephone connection...

Susan: long addresses too....

Alex: They'll just write that into the text window. So, then you can look down, copy that and paste it, and that allows them to have multiple ways of getting the information to you.

Susan: Fabulous! So you might be able to have a phone call and the text chat at the same time?

Alex: That's right. But in any case, that's certainly a perfectly valid route to go.

Susan: Absolutely. Now, you said one of the most difficult issues, of course, is that the technician can't see what's going on in your computer. Is that changing in the future?

Alex: well, there are many technologies that are available that are coming out. they're on the horizon right now. And different places are looking at how to provide remote desktop support where the technician can actually look at and see your desktop. But, there are all sorts of issues involved with that. There are legal issues and privacy issues,

Susan: security issues

Alex: security...I would think in letting someone get access to your own computer.

Susan: Now this has been going on in the business world for a long time, right?

Alex: A lot of businesses, they can do that because the company owns all the computers so they can just say "this is how we're gonna do things here." and it's different for home networks and home users because privacy and security is a really major concern for them and rightly so.

Susan: But what a nice thing to be able to do to just say I've got this problem, here, you can take care of it for me.

Alex: There are places that are working on ways to get the best of both worlds, security and privacy, while giving the technician a few more tools to be able to see what's going on in the computer.

Susan: Thank you so much for being here today Alex!

Alex: you're welcome!

Susan: well, that's our show for this week. Hopefully, you're now ready to tackle that cryptic error message you've been ignoring on your computer. here are some resources you can turn to for more information about finding help.computerhope.com is a site with a wealth of information about computer problems; expertsexchange.com is a good source of information from forums and newsgroups; apple.com/support contains Macintosh support information; and finally, technet.com will bring you to Microsoft's official support page. If you missed any portion of this show or if you just want to see it all again, stop by our web site. It's techtalk.umn.edu. Next week, we'll be talking about getting organized. A few minutes a day can make your computing life a whole lot easier! Until then, I'm Susan McKinnell.

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Executive Producer

Robert H. Bruininks

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Steve Cawley

Shih-Pau Yen

Host

Susan McKinnell

Producer / Director

Susan J. Tade

Associate Producer

J.B. Eckert

Assistant Director

Rich Reardon

Technical Director

Steve Barbo

Audio

Jonathan Kranzler

Floor Director

J.B. Eckert

Cameras

Laura Cervin

Hope Johnson

David Lindeman

Lighting and Set Design

Laura Cervin

Graphic Design
Nicky Torkzadeh

Effects Design
Paul Pecilunas

Make-Up / Prompter
Cindy Rae-Betting

Web Development Team
Christina Goodland
Doug Hamlin
Kellie Greaves

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