Ventures

DeGeeking 101

Meet the Stevenson facebook Generation

THE ART OF *Teaching*

" To be a geek or not to be a geek? That is the question."

" IT students need to study more than just IT."

" Remember to communicate on a 'human level'."

*DeGeeking

Building Business Acumen into Technology Curricula

HAVE YOU EVER "BLOWN YOUR BUFFER" OR "JUICED YOUR BRICK"? ARE YOU A "MOUSE POTATO" OR TOTALLY "404," DUDE?

EXCUSE ME? YOU WOULD HAVE TO BE A REAL GEEK TO UNDER-STAND THIS.

Exactly!

Because the IS (information systems) and IT (information technology) fields have their own unique languages and terms to describe technological and computer processes, students who become ingrained in this way of thinking and communicating are at risk.

Lawrence Burgee, Ph.D., Department Chair of Information Systems and Associate Professor of Information Technology in Stevenson's Brown School of Business and Leadership, is an admitted technophile. Computers, the Internet, programming, apps, online security, e-commerce, and e-marketing absorb his personal and professional thoughts. In fact, the last 12 years of his professional life have focused on teaching IS and IT at the university level. But he realizes that there is a hidden danger to being absorbed in "Technospeak" (to those on the inside of the field) and "Technobabble" (to those on the outside). You just might become a quintessential "geek."

101:

For all the technological know-how, he admits there are risks to remaining a geek into your professional life. In fact, it might just limit your career potential.

"I tell our students, 'Yes, IS and IT are vital to business, but, no, they are not the end-all and be-all of business operations or goals.'"

UrbanDictionary.com defines geek as "the people you pick on in high school and wind up working for as an adult," as well as a "nerd" or "dork" with "technical skills." Geeks are usually touted for their great technical abilities while being knocked for social awkwardness, lack of communications skills, and a self-effacing attitude that makes them disappear into the background behind computer screens and pizza boxes.

"I have taught marketing courses for the same period that I have taught IS courses," Burgee says. "Over the years of teaching very different courses in marketing and IS, it became evident to me that there are drastic differences between marketing and business majors and IS majors. I would add that I spent the first 13 years of my career in private industry in various IS positions, and I saw firsthand on a daily basis how awkwardly IS professionals operated—including myself early in my career."

GEEKS: WHERE THEY ARE, WHAT THEY DO

"Many IS students (and IS professionals) are so ingrained in Technospeak, that they totally miss the big-picture business issues faced by organizations," Burgee observes. "The geeks usually see no reason to operate otherwise. Many have difficulty in social situations and prefer to hang out in front of the computer where they feel much more comfortable. They often shy away from courses with team projects and are much more interested in technological processes than business results."

In this situation, Burgee and his colleagues saw a challenge: how do we prepare these techies for the realities of the business world and career advancement?

"Our IS students are quite intelligent and are very diligent and dedicated workers—traits that any employer would desire in an employee. But there are other dimensions of the modern world of business where geek traits might hinder them," Burgee says. "We want to help them find a balance."

For example, he has observed a sharp contrast between marketing students skilled at selling themselves and their ideas and the unfortunately-labeled geeks who see nothing wrong with their actions, techie jargon, or casual self-presentation. In the business world, geeks will need to explain their solutions to colleagues who do not work at the technical levels of the organization. They will need to be able to sell their ideas and strategies to managers and executives. They might have a technical solution or innovation to share, but they must be able to explain it and integrate it with other levels of a business organization, from management to marketing. In other words, Technospeak is not the language of the Corporate Board Room.

"Many geeks have great ideas that if sold and implemented could help companies improve operations or launch a new product—and help their careers, too," he adds. Just think of the geeks who have changed the world, from how we communicate to how we learn and work: Gates, Jobs, Wozniak, Page, and Brin.

"The geeks who have become household names didn't remain geeks throughout their careers. They developed business, finance, and marketing skills to grow their companies," Burgee says. "As IS faculty members, we need to prepare them academically and for professional opportunities ahead. We believe that degeeking is key to giving our students a competitive edge in the career marketplace."

DEGEEKING: THE NEXT GENERATION

So how do you start degeeking the next generation of IS graduates? Open conversations with many of the companies and organizations that hire IS graduates are critical to help garner feedback on what they are looking for in new hires. The Department of Information Systems has started reaching out to employers to better understand what companies want.

"Over and over again, my colleagues and I hear from business leaders that they want the technical skills coupled with strong business and interpersonal skills," Burgee. "They want degeeked techies."

Armed with this information, the School of Business and Leadership is working to incorporate several business course options into the Business Information Systems (BIS) and Computer Information Systems (CIS) curricula as well as to develop three new business-oriented IS courses: Management Information Systems, Principles of E-Commerce, and Human-Computer Interaction. These courses emphasize the business and interpersonal aspects of computing to impart greater business and communication skills.

Paul D. Lack, Ph.D., Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs and Acting Dean of the School of Business and Leadership, believes degeeking is essential to the mission of the School.

"Our school is one of business … and leadership. We do not want to forget those two elements in any program that we offer. Our goal is to give students knowledge while developing those personal and professional traits that will put them on a leadership path. Degeeking is a great way to help our students develop these traits."

The new degeeking approach includes:
• Encouraging all professors to incorporate projects and activities that stress the solving of business issues and problems.
• Having students create a visible portfolio of accomplishments (internships, study abroad, community service, entrepreneurial activity, teamwork, etc.) that they can show to potential employers.
• Helping students present a clean and professional image in person and on the Web via tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn, personal websites, etc.

"As a character in a Tom Clancy novel once pointed out, 'Computers are digital, but life is analog,'" says **Sidas Saulynas**, Instructor of Information Systems. Saulynas teaches the course Presentation Theory and Applications in the CIS and BIS programs "to help students rediscover the 'humanspeak' that resides in between the 0's and the 1's of the digital world."

In addition to missing the importance of non-technical communication and understanding business operations, one of the other major dangers of "geekdom" is assuming that the way students are using the technology—texting, social media, Facebook, Twitter, and so on—is how everyone is using it, including the business world.

"What's socially acceptable to a student is not in the business community," Burgee says. "Students—geeks or otherwise—need to know that what you post on the web can help or hurt your job search or your career if you are already employed."

Burgee plans to carefully monitor the Department of Information Systems' degeeking efforts and will follow up with employers for further input as students complete internships and enter the workplace upon graduation.

"I view this as a long-term effort that will give Stevenson graduates a competitive edge in the marketplace," Burgee says. "I was a computer information systems graduate a quarter-century ago, and I sure wish I had been degeeked while in college."

THE GEEKS Speak

Justin Merrill is a senior CIS major with a focus on network design. He is also president of Stevenson's chapter of the Phi Beta Lambda business and leadership honor society. You might say that he was degeeked before degeeking was cool.

"When I define the word 'geek' and what it takes to qualify oneself as such, I have to look inward quite a bit," Merrill says. His interest with computers and technology started in middle school with programming in QuickBasic. In high school, he started playing multi-user games with his friends, such as "Half-Life" and "Counterstrike."

"Because none of our parents had anything faster than 56k dial-up connections, a group of us all went out and bought network cards and a couple of switches. Eventually, I was hosting 20-person LAN (local area network) parties with my buddies in my best friend's basement."

The games were fun, says Merrill, but it was building networks that was his true passion. In short, he was a techie/geek through and through.

"The excitement of the LAN party truthfully had nothing to do with the video game. What fascinated me was the network we had set up and the dedicated Linux server I built to host multiple game, file, and DHCP services."

Still, Merrill thinks that he really never needed to be degeeked.

"It was from personal projects and successes such as the LAN development that kept me so interested in the field of information technology," says Merrill. To him, embracing technology and helping other people understand its powers are creative activities.

"Dr. Burgee is teaching students that businesses are not only looking for smart, intellectual, and analytical thinkers, but also for personalities that they can trust with their most valuable customers. The business world is tightly integrating with the IT environment, and it is critically important that we students have the patience and ability to effectively communicate business needs to a team of leaders."

Heather Prosser, a senior CIS major from Baltimore, says she tries to remember the "human factor" behind all uses of technology.

"In a world of growing technology, we can all be consumed by it so much that we lose touch of human tendencies," she says. "The important thing to remember when studying, improving, and communicating about technology is that ultimately people are involved, and the complexities of technology are hard for many human minds to understand."

Prosser's strategy is to communicate on a "human level" rather than a "computer" one.

"Ultimately, people are the ones using the computers. Geeks should continue to learn and study what interests them, but don't forget why those interests are important. They are important because of the people they will help."

Ebenezer Thomas, graduated in May 2010, and the month after his graduation was hired as a consultant by Sogeti USA, an international leader in IT consulting services to business.

Geeks, he says, "can't stay to themselves" and need to communicate effectively and to expand their areas of knowledge and skills to be able to succeed in the business world.

"I believe that IT students need to study more than just IT. They need to understand the other aspects of businesses such as finance, budgets, and management if they expect to grow in their jobs and take on more responsibility."

Thomas took courses in marketing while a student at Stevenson, and is glad that his position challenges him to acquire new business skills. "As a consultant, I need to be versatile. I have an IT background but I have worked on projects that required business analysis and quality assurance."

"There have always been some students who 'get it', and they tend to land the better jobs upon graduation," Burgee says. "They already know how to sell themselves and are aware that the skill set required for business success goes well beyond technology and computer skills. As educators and as mentors, we want all of our students to degeek and succeed."