



OPINION

## Career advice: Why public speaking is a critical skill

Plus, knowing what interviewers are looking for, and more

By Jay Leader

Computerworld |

APR 18, 2011 1:09 PM PT



iRobot's Jay Leader

### Ask a Premier 100 IT Leader

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*Leader is this month's Premier 100 IT Leader, answering questions about the value of training in public speaking, how to talk to job interviewers and more. If you have a question you'd like to pose to*

*one of our Premier 100 IT Leaders, send it to [askaleader@computerworld.com](mailto:askaleader@computerworld.com).*

**My boss wants me to take a course in public speaking, which terrifies me. I also don't see the point. He's not the sort of person you question, so I'll ask you: Why would a back-room IT guy need to bother with this?** Public speaking is a critical skill that is valuable to anyone, regardless of their general duties or responsibilities. It's critical to be able to clearly articulate a point of view, proposal or solution to those who are impacted, and I'm sure you will be surprised by the number of times you will be called on to make these kinds of presentations. As a "back-room IT guy" I can think of many occasions where you'll be called upon to speak -- gaining approval for a major infrastructure purchase, or outlining the need for and details of a necessary system outage, for example. Adding public speaking ability to your personal toolbox will be a very worthwhile investment.



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**Since being laid off nine months ago, I've had a few interviews, but they haven't gone well. The problem has been that the interviewers don't seem to know much about technology, and so they have no way of evaluating the validity of my responses. I've begun to wonder, though, about the people they end up hiring. Are IT jobs going to less technically adept people who know how to talk to these people?**

More than ever, IT jobs are being filled as much on "soft" skills like communication, teamwork and cultural fit as they are on pure technical capability. Many interviewers (myself included) are not part of the interview process to assess your technical skills, but rather to evaluate these type of factors. I think it's always important to know (and it's perfectly fine to ask) what each interviewer is looking for from the interview so that you can tune your responses to fit their needs. Talking about bits and bytes to a person who's assessing your cultural fit with the team or organization is a natural mismatch of expectations, so work hard to understand each person's role and background before you show up to interview.

**Sometimes I feel like the lone woman in an old boys' club when the IT directors get together. I hold my own on the technology and business issues, but a lot of the discussion is devoted to football and golf. In itself, that doesn't annoy me, and I pay**

**enough attention to sports to not feel entirely left out. Still, I'm usually the one who directs everyone to the business at hand, and I think I'm getting labeled as the killjoy. Now, that does annoy me, because I'm actually a fun-loving person. Is this something I should even worry about?** I don't think you should worry, but I also think it's important to understand the dynamics of your work environment and be able and willing to adapt yourself to the culture and behaviors that exist in your specific situation. Cultures are typically bigger than individuals, and trying to change them to suit your own particular preferences might lead others to believe that you're "not with the program." Building relationships is critical to being effective, and if you can find common (though perhaps not ideal) ground to use as a basis for relationship-building you'll have a much better chance to be viewed as a team player.

**I am working in the U.S. on an H1-B visa. Most of my colleagues have been helpful, some have been welcoming, and a few have been openly hostile. I try not to take this personally; I know there is much anguish and debate over my type of visa. But how should I handle these co-workers?** Most people are reasonable and supportive of colleagues trying to build a career, but there are always a few who will look for the negatives in any situation. You didn't author the H1-B program and aren't accountable for its positives and negatives, you're simply trying to follow the defined process and secure an opportunity to build a career as offered through the program. I think being open and honest about your intent and motives will carry the day with your reasonable colleagues, and all you can ask and expect from the rest is understanding, if not agreement.

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