

# *Information Technology*

## **Support? What Support?!**

If you think the quality of technical support from computer makers has declined in the last few years, you're not alone. The December, 2002 issues of *Consumer Reports* and *PC World* rated computer manufacturers' support for response timeliness, accuracy, and how many tries it took to fix problems. Both polled large numbers of people and got similar responses.

The bad news is that both tech support and product quality declined in the last two years. *PC World* readers reported more problems with hardware components, and sometimes lengthy struggles with vendors to replace failing parts. Even well-regarded makers like Dell and IBM got lower scores than before, and Compaq and HP got low marks. Good news for Mac users, though – both magazines rated Apple tops.

What's causing this? Two words: *cost cutting*. Low margins led manufacturers to outsource tech support, sometimes halfway around the world. New techs may receive only two weeks of training, and turnover is high. With PCs so cheap, there's little room in the cost structure for support. Products are getting more complex, too – DVD recorders, CD-RWs, wireless, more things to break.

There is some good news. Software is (finally) improving. Windows XP and Mac OS-X are significantly more stable than prior versions. Computer makers are (finally) realizing that it's less expensive to solve problems the first time than to handle repeat calls.

How can you minimize calls to tech support? When buying, consider quality and service history as well as price. Consult trade magazines and talk to people with similar needs. Don't install software you don't need.

When you need support, gather as much information about the problem as possible. What conditions cause it? Note the exact text of error messages, and look them up on the Web. If you can, back up your data. When you call, keep your cool - it's not the tech's fault your system is broken. If the tech has you do something that doesn't make sense, ask for an explanation, and if it seems flaky, ask for another tech.

Researchers are talking about “self-healing” hardware and software. I can't wait!

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