

Non-Technologists' Perceptions Of Technology Professionals . . . And Vice-Versa

Summary of a Presentation to the Houston Organizational Development Network

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John Eggert, Ph.D.
Executive and Team Coach

What is this document?

This is a brief summary of the 30,000+ words of comments made by 120 persons—professionals in engineering, science and technology, and their non-tech counterparts—in a survey completed between October 12 and November 3, 2010.

Purpose of the survey

The purpose of the survey was better understand the challenges to communication and collaboration among professionals from technology-related disciplines and those from outside of these disciplines.

Caution: The findings described in this report are based on subjective, post hoc analyses of a large number of responses to open-ended questions and must be interpreted in that light.

Topic 1: Barriers “technologists” and non-technologists bring to the party

The following is a summary of answers to the request: “Please describe in 10 - 100 words the behaviors of action or thought demonstrated by non-technologists [technologists] that sometimes get in the way of the effective conduct of business.”

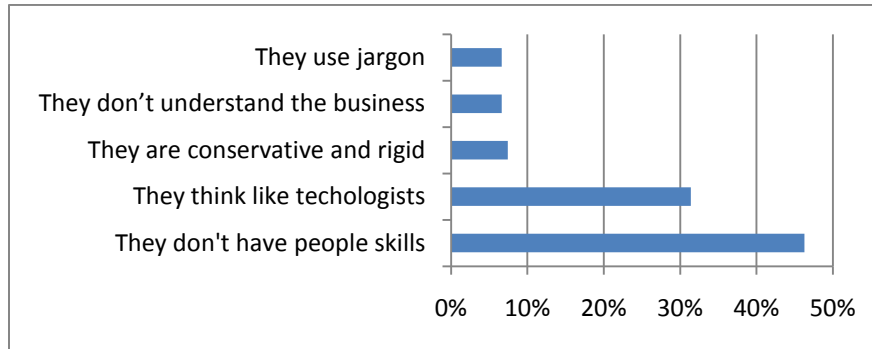


Exhibit A: Non-technologist’s characterization of barriers presented by “technologists”

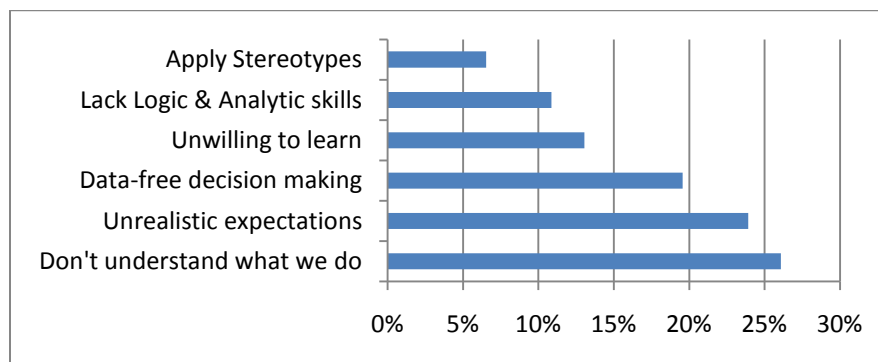


Exhibit B: “Technologist’s” characterization of barriers presented by non-technologists

Note: “Technologists” was defined as those who “consider themselves to be professionals in science, technology or engineering.”

Issues discussed by audience and presenter at November HODN meeting

- Although the above items parallel common stereotypes, the fact that 120 people were willing to write 30,000+ words about them suggest that there may be more than a grain of truth behind the stereotypes.
- Respondents were specifically asked to identify barriers; therefore the differences in perceptions between the two groups may be exaggerated in the responses.
- Differences in expectations of each other may lie just under the surface, ready to appear as barriers when one or the other feels threatened or attacked.
- Recognition and discussion of these differences within a team may diffuse the potential of these differences to cause difficulties.

Topic 2: Advice "technologists" and non-technologists have for each other

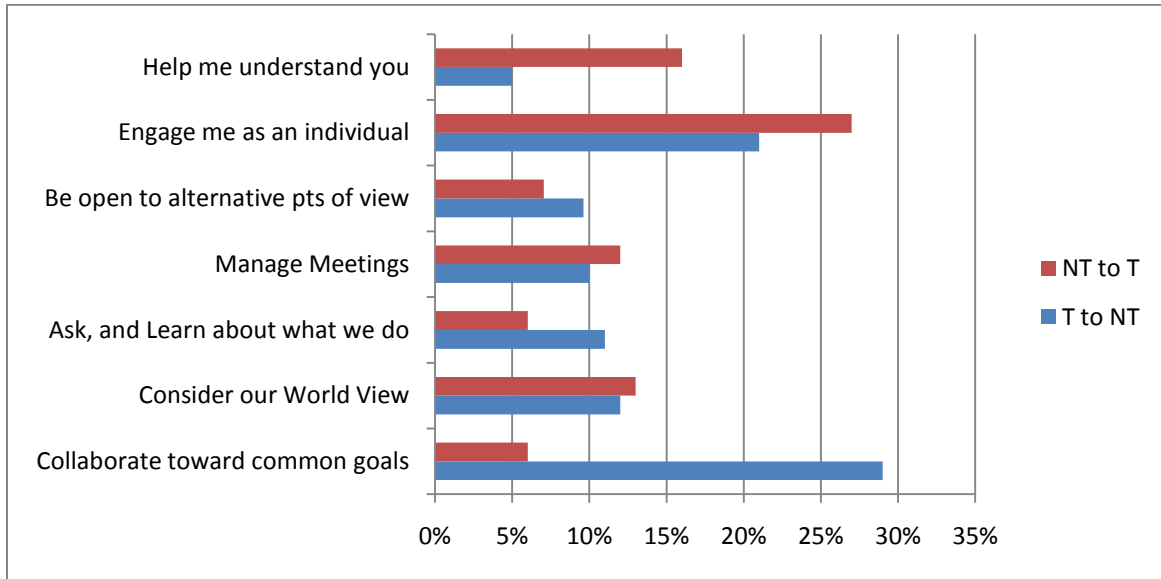


Exhibit C: Categories of advice given by non-technologists to technologists, and *vice-versa*.

Issues discussed by audience and presenter at November HODN meeting

- There are as many similarities among the two groups of respondents, in terms of the nature of their advice to each other, as there are differences between them.
- The largest differences between the two groups relate to issues of mutual understanding, collaboration and/or engagement.
- The non-technologists more often expressed a need for individual understanding and engagement, while the technologists more often emphasized a need to focus on project or organizational goals.
- Both of these approaches to engagement (orientation to individuals vs. orientation to common goals) are indications of a desire to work effectively with each other.
- However, the desire for working together may go unrecognized by the other because of different orientations to the concept of engagement or collaboration.
- Although not explicitly listed in the above charts, the issue of respect for one another and for each other's expertise was a frequently cited factor that cut across many of the response categories.
- Naming and acknowledging differences and potential barriers (the "elephants" in the room) may be the most effective way of avoiding them.

Methodology and Demographics

Approach

An informal survey comprised entirely of open-ended (free response) questions was submitted to a diverse population. The first question asked if the respondents considered themselves to be “professionals in science, engineering or technology,” the answer to which determined which of two versions of the survey they would complete. The two forms of the survey were identical, except that that the version completed by the technology professionals asked for their perceptions of non-technologists, and vice versa.

Respondents were asked to comment on two issues from a variety of perspectives:

1. How do they perceive their counterparts on the other side of the technological divide?
2. What advice could they provide to those on “the other side” to help them to communicate and collaborate more effectively across the technological divide?

Method of Analysis and the Utility of Subjective Data

The analysis of these responses was necessarily subjective and rests entirely on the insights and interpretation of the author. After transferring the 30,000+ words to spreadsheets and slicing them into individual topics, the author then developed a categorization scheme through an iterative process and subjectively but thoughtfully assigned comments to these categories.

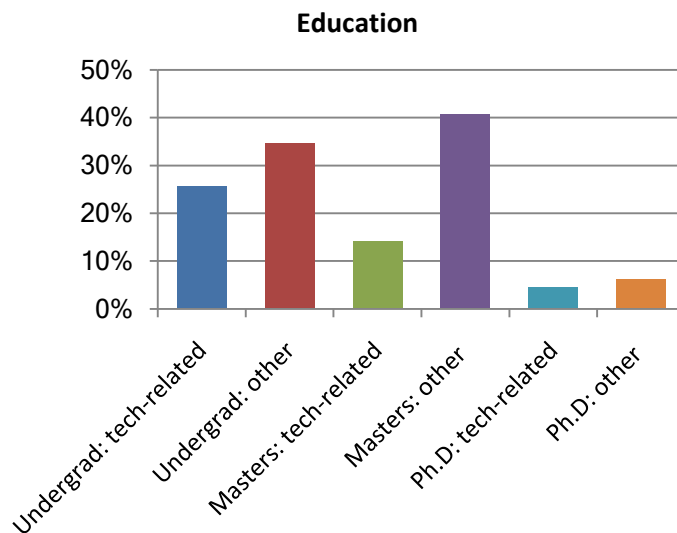
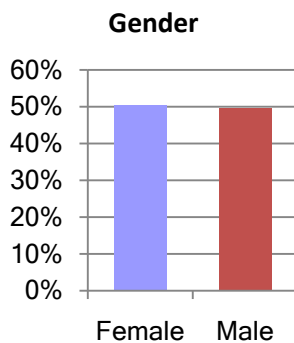
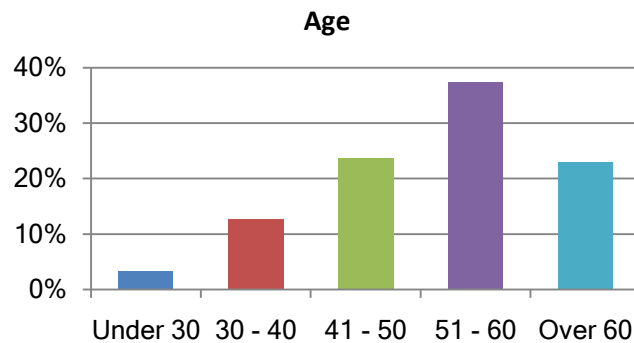
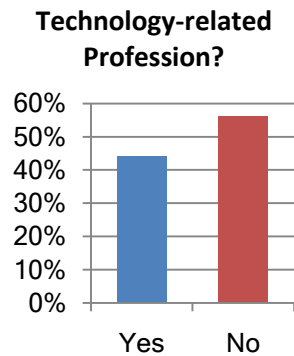
The utility of the data is not in the uncovering of truths, as the data holds few surprises and more or less parallels the well known stereotypes technologists hold of non-technologists and vice versa. Rather, they are useful because they shine light on and behind these stereotypes and allow us to ask “Why?” and “So what?”

If the “Why?” and “So what?” discussions with the audience of technical and non-technical professionals at the recent HODN (Houston Organizational Development Network) meeting are any indication, there is value in bringing these issues to the surface and addressing them when they appear to be interfering with effective communication and collaboration among technical and non-technical professionals.

[more . . .]

Demographics of Respondents

120 individuals responded to the survey. The following data shows the distribution of respondents in terms of several categories.



Note: 120 persons completed the survey, although not everyone completed each item, therefore the percentage base of each graph may be slightly different. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one item in the education category.

Next Steps

The open-ended comments along with the summary analysis will be used to create a more rigorous survey consisting of closed-end (multiple choice) questions. This will be distributed to a wider set of respondents allowing for a more precise quantitative analysis.

The results of the present survey will continue to be used as fodder for discussions among professionals from technical and non-technical disciplines as a means for examining related issues within existing teams and organizations.

Further Participation

Please contact John Eggert if you would like to discuss these issues one-on-one or in a group setting, or if you would like to be kept informed of additional work in this area.

John Eggert, Ph.D., SPHR

jeggert@IdeaLeadership.com

832 330 2536

www.IdeaLeadership.com

About the Author

John Eggert, Ph.D., SPHR, is an executive coach who specializes in working with senior professionals in science and technology, and their teams. John has over 25 years experience in the performance improvement industry, primarily working through his own business, The Idea Leadership Company. He is certified as a Gestalt Coaching Professional by the Gestalt institute of Cleveland.

John's Ph.D. is from the Division of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, with an emphasis on research design, statistics and measurement. This has helped him to understand the methodology of science and technology. More importantly, his direct experience with the challenge of creating useful conceptual frameworks from messy data—the stuff of both coaching and organizational development—puts him on common ground (or at least shared borders) with science and technology professionals.

Since John moved to Houston from Chicago in 2005 he has worked with a variety of petrochemical and engineering firms in the Houston area. Previous clients have included the National Science Foundation, Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, General Motors, and Lockheed Martin. Clients from less technical industries include Arthur Andersen, McDonalds, Pricewaterhousecoopers, the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) and the Human Capital Institute (HCI),