

SCHOOLS MUST BRIDGE THE OTHER DIGITAL DIVIDE

We techies are a strange bunch, even by our own standards. We see things differently from the vast majority of school staff, often spending days sitting over a keyboard, working on a problem that you don't even know exists. We talk to computers (often verbally!) in a variety of tongues, but most of all, we want things to work correctly.

Classroom vandalism is quite common, as is the neglect that IT equipment suffers in various departments, with staff devolving responsibility for the care of IT resources back to the IT support staff without realising that the equipment belongs to their department, and for the most part the responsibility for repairing or replacing said equipment will come out of their budgets. For we techies, trying to get teaching staff in schools to recognise their responsibility for the IT equipment in their care often leaves us bewildered and disheartened.

There are some good reasons why we feel this way, and why some teachers feel their techies are a little 'awkward' in how they provide their support service to them. As a career group, we began turning up in substantial numbers in schools after the inception of the National Grid for Learning project, launched in 1998 when UK schools saw massive investment in their IT infrastructure and provision. Suddenly the teacher who was a bit of an IT hobbyist became overwhelmed by the workload and knowledge required to run what was rapidly developing into the equivalent of a large commercial network.

So adverts were placed in newspapers and we began to arrive at your schools, set up shop, often in old store rooms, cupboards and in some cases converted toilets, and work to the standards that we had had to meet in the industrial environment we came from.

In some cases, this got on a lot of staff's nerves, as schools had previously been insulated from the rules and legislation we have to abide by. It was a rude awakening to

find that they didn't always have licences for much of software they were running, or that their little departmental private network was not only responsible for spreading viruses throughout the school, but allowing children to have unfiltered internet access.

Slowly but surely over the years, we have brought school networks in the UK up to industry standards for reliability and availability, and often beyond that basic level. After all, in industry people can do paperwork when their PC is not working. It's a very different thing in a learning environment where the rapid resolution of problems becomes the order of the day.

But for we ICT folk, it has not been an easy ride as careers go. Schools were often reluctant to pay for any kind of training for us, and unlike many qualifications, our professional qualifications expire, and to be suddenly employed at less than industry level wages by an employer who refuses to train their employees in vital skills has meant that many highly skilled techies leave schools with

fewer recognised skills than they began with.

If schools refused to train teaching staff, we'd have a national strike on our hands. As ICT becomes an integral part of education, this will become a very serious problem. It needs to be addressed, and soon.

Happily, this is by no means the case everywhere, and many of the best and most progressive schools in the UK invest heavily in staff training at all levels. In several cases their network managers are now in the senior leadership teams, recognising the importance of IT throughout the entire school.

Please remember that we techies are professionals too, and require training and career structures – something that has never occurred for 'non-teaching staff' (I hate the phrase 'non-teacher', it's a kind of workplace apartheid). Schools in the 21st century are evolving and now rely on a wider spectrum of professionals than teachers. The sooner we recognise this, the better it will be for the children who rely on us all for their education. **ICT**



Chris Byers is the founder of EduGeek, the online forum and resource for schools' technical staff – see www.EduGeek.net