How Do You Say "Property" in the Technical World?

By "Techies" Yudiann Carlo, CPPS and George Noll, CPPS, Nova Chapter

As an industry professional, you have the ability and the property-given right to march down the hall to your IT office with your head held high, and feel empowered to present information in a way that you know they will understand. Accepting and appreciating how the technical mind functions is integral to translating issues and projects so that they can be understood and ultimately resolved.

If there is one general concept that I can help you understand about "techies" it is that, very much like our machine counterparts, we tend to see everything in terms of zeros and ones. Every statement is either *True* or *False*. Every question has a simple *Yes* or *No* answer. There are no gray areas. In our overcomplicated minds, the big picture can always be broken down into smaller pixels until the answer is *black* or *white*, *yes* or *no*, a *0* or a *1*.

Techie Tip #1

We like to keep it simple. The perfect example of our commitment to simplicity is our obsession with lists. Outlines, spreadsheets, tables, rows and columns… We are partial to anything that comes in a structured format. For example, it is no secret that task lists were cleverly orchestrated by non-technical project managers so they could track and assign more work to us. However, we embrace task lists nonetheless because they represent a series of simple, clear, neat and tidy steps that come together beautifully in an easy-to-check-off list. While you may thoughtfully spend the better part of your day crafting a detailed and descriptive explanation, the easiest way to capture our attention is to identify key points, tasks or questions by creating a visual list.

Techie Tip #2

We are very visual people. We like to see and understand everything in our own way. Although this attitude can be misinterpreted as "trust issues," we just need to experience your pain and suffering so that we can better assess the urgency of your request. This is definitely in your best interest! For example, if you are experiencing system errors

or inconsistencies, always remember that screenshots are your best friend! As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. To a technical person, a picture accompanied by an example, or a list of steps that can be reproduced, is often worth a thousand more! When provided with sufficient information to recreate a problem, we will stop at nothing until a solution can be found.

Techie Tip #3

Help us feel your pain. Technically minded people view and comprehend issues differently from their non-technical counterparts. In some cases, it may seem like we speak a different language, but if we put our frustrations aside, we can easily bridge the gap that seems to exist between the functional and technical worlds. We can begin by breaking down broad topics into smaller categories. Then, for each category, we can identify a set of "yes or no" questions, or "true or false" statements that clearly define all requirements. Finally, when discussing more complex issues, the visualization of examples that we can both follow and identify with is the key to opening up the communication channels and breaking the language barrier.

So, what does this mean to the property professional? How can knowing how a techie thinks help you perform your job and achieve common end-goals? To illustrate how this knowledge can be helpful, one can look at several practical examples of how commonly used phrases should be translated so that they are quickly and effectively comprehended by your local techie. This can be considered an abridged pocket guide for use when you find yourself valiantly traveling without a translator into the unknown world of IT.

What does the property system do?

Techie Translation: What are the system functionality and system components?

A System Functionality and/or System Components Summary is a high level overview of the functionality of a property system and the ways in which users can access it. It makes a nice addition to training materials and user guides. It can also be very useful in project kick-off meetings when introducing a new technical team to your property system.

I need help. Who do I call?

Techie Translation: Which technical team is assigned to this type of request?

It is important to identify which teams are in charge of supporting the different aspects of your property system. One team may be in charge of supporting user machines and troubleshooting application errors, and another team may be in charge of reporting. In some cases, there may be one team through which all requests must be funneled. Whatever the case may be, it is crucial to make sure that everyone understands the level of support that is expected from every team.

How can I obtain a list of property records that have something specific in common?

Techie Translation: Is there an existing report or is this a new reporting requirement?

Reporting is probably the most useful piece of any property system. Property managers diligently maintain property data with the ultimate objective of accurate reporting. It is important to understand existing and future reporting needs, and it is crucial to define to your report builders which metrics the property community and higher level executives need to see in order to achieve desired outcomes.

Help! I'm being audited. Can my property system tell what happened to this piece of property eight months ago?

Techie Translation: Does the property system have auditabi-lity and historical data?

It always helps to be prepared for audits ahead of time by identifying any existing security and audit requirements for a property system and communicating those findings with the respective technical groups. Explain to your technical team which requirements are usually the most important to the property management auditors and work together to create a plan to satisfy these requirements.

How can I get data from another system into my property system? (Or vice versa)

Techie Translation: Is there an existing interface between the two systems or is this a new interface requirement?

For any organization to be most efficient, data should be consistent and work should not be duplicated within the organization. If a requirement exists to share data between two systems, an interface can be established between them. It should be a best practice for any organization to identify and

document all existing interfaces that either extract data from your property system or provide data for your property system. For new interfaces, the most important technical document is a field-to-field mapping, which acts as a guideline for developers to acquire the right data and populate the correct fields. IT managers should be made aware of additional areas where a need for sharing data exists or if there are any other internal organizations that have a need for property data.

The information in the system is incorrect.

Techie Translation: We need data cleanup to ensure data integrity.

If a property system has been in place for a long period of time over which policies may have changed, data inconsistencies may exist which require a data cleanup. A technical team can assist by identifying areas where data should be standardized so that a plan can be devised for completing the cleanup activities. Additionally, it is usually beneficial for a property system to include a "list of values" wherever possible to ensure that data is consistent and validated. Documenting data integrity exercises ensure effectiveness and accuracy. Users and functional personnel must explain to developers the importance of accurate data within a property management system and the negative impact that existing "bad" data may have on the system.

There is a lot of data that I do not want to enter into the property system manually.

Techie Translation: We need bulk loads, data migrations and/or system integrations.

If new property data is consistent with data that is already in the property system, a technical team may be able to develop a process by which asset records or reference data can be loaded all at once. In some cases, the volume of data and/or inconsistencies in new property data may require a migration plan. Identifying all past and future migrations, along with the source systems and system owners, will help immensely when it comes to migrating data into an existing property system.

Now that we have shared all our secrets and offered our best counsel, what can you do with your newly acquired technical language skills? Your days of frustration are over and the possibilities for success are endless! Clean up your data, fix those errors that you have been ignoring for years, build those interfaces that you've imagined… you can do it all! There is just one thing holding you back: how do you make sure that your initiatives stay on track, on budget, and on schedule from your first conversation until the final implementation?

Typical IT projects revolve around a project management practice called the Software Development Life Cycle. Staying true to our visual and structured nature, we appreciate that it is broken down into seven simple steps.

Step 1: Requirements

Use your "translation" skills to communicate what you want to accomplish and justify why it needs to be done.

Step 2: Analysis

Work together with your "techies" to outline an overall approach and assess any risks that you may encounter.

Step 3: Design

Break down all of the requirements into smaller pieces that make sense to everyone. Ask for options and recommendations. Then, take advantage of the visual nature by crafting layouts and flowcharts to define all of the requirements, processes and practices in more detail.

Step 4: Development

This is where you sit back and let us do what we do best! If you want to make yourself useful during this phase, you can do so by making sure we can concentrate on the project and shield us from other distractions.

Step 5: Testing

Pull out your pocket guide for this one and keep it on hand. Be patient. You will be working with your technical team back and forth until you get exactly what you envisioned. Keep track of any tasks and fixes that will have to be recreated at the time of implementation.

Step 6: Implementation

Schedule some down time for the team and document your marvelous creation. To prevent anything from going wrong on your day of glory, make sure you refer to the checklist that you created in the testing phase. Finally, before it becomes available, communicate your new project to others, along with any change management issues,

so that they can savor it and enjoy it as much as you will.

Step 7: Maintenance

At this point, everyone can breathe a sigh of relief and celebrate. However, the job is not quite done. It is crucial to ensure that help and training is available for the new processes.

Before you begin your next IT project, remember to make a list, define it twice, and make sure all your techies are going to play nice. Follow the Software Development Life Cycle in your project plans to impress the technical minds and keep them on track at the same time. Try not to focus on the frustrations you've encountered in the past. You have positioned yourself in a new world where everyone can meet in the middle and communicate without having to speak the same language. The key is to channel your "inner-techie" and ask yourself the question: "How can I simplify, organize, and help them visualize what I'm trying to accomplish?" ■

BIOGRAPHY

Yudiann Carlo, CPPS, is a Senior Software Engineer at Sunflower Systems and a member of the NPMA NOVA chapter. Mrs. Carlo specializes in asset management system implementations and customer solution services.

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