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## How to never deal with users again

Granted, "never" may be a stretch, but there are ways to make users happy without going nuts.

Imagine there's a CIO-sized Tooth Fairy in the meeting room. She's asking all the good little IT professionals what they want in exchange for their molars.

"To never, ever have to deal with end users again," they tell her.

How do we know about the highly classified negotiations that take place between the Tooth Fairy and her clientele? Because we asked!

Not long ago, we asked tech pros what they pine for. It resulted in [The IT Worker Bucket List](https://insights.hpe.com/articles/the-it-worker-bucket-list-40-things-tech-pros-wish-for-1705.html) (<https://insights.hpe.com/articles/the-it-worker-bucket-list-40-things-tech-pros-wish-for-1705.html>). Sure enough, the group of people that tech pros called "lusers" (before evolving to the more positive labels of "stakeholders" or

"end users") made an appearance on that wish list of 40 items. Or, rather, tech pros' daydreams about users' disappearance did: "Never having to deal with users again. That'd be pretty high up there for me," one IT pro said wistfully.

Before I give out recipes for vanishing potions, let's pause for a public service announcement: We must always bear in mind that end users are tech professionals' *raison d'être*. They are why you get a paycheck and space at a desk. Failing to serve them ultimately is [a career-limiting move](https://insights.hpe.com/articles/13-ways-to-tank-your-it-career-1707.html) (<https://insights.hpe.com/articles/13-ways-to-tank-your-it-career-1707.html>).

Also, please remember that the poor creatures are intimidated by you, as one correspondent vividly pointed out. "Being a techie is like being a modern version of a voodoo witch doctor who knows how to make zombies using fish poison," says Pablo Solomon, [designer and futurist](http://www.pablosolomon.com/) (<http://www.pablosolomon.com/>). "You folks can hack, pass the buck, and hang up. People are afraid of you, dread trying to get your help, and they long for truly trouble-free technology."

We know that you feel users' fear and loathing, along with their paycheck support. If you want to be kinder and gentler with end users—thereby reducing your own stress levels and helping your workplace to be [that much less](https://insights.hpe.com/articles/how-to-succeed-in-it-without-social-skills-1705.html) of a hell hole (<https://insights.hpe.com/articles/how-to-succeed-in-it-without-social-skills-1705.html>)—go check out the scads of good articles meant to make you a better person. There are listicles with [tips to handle difficult end users](http://www8.hp.com/h30458/ww/en/smb/1217415.html) (<http://www8.hp.com/h30458/ww/en/smb/1217415.html>), [bridging the gap between IT and end users](http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-things-to-help-you-bridge-the-it-end-user-divide/#_blank) ([http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-things-to-help-you-bridge-the-it-end-user-divide/#\\_blank](http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-things-to-help-you-bridge-the-it-end-user-divide/#_blank)), [things you shouldn't do](http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-you-shouldnt-do-when-dealing-with-end-users/#_blank) ([http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-you-shouldnt-do-when-dealing-with-end-users/#\\_blank](http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-you-shouldnt-do-when-dealing-with-end-users/#_blank)) when dealing with them, and [forging stronger relationships](http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-ways-to-forge-strong-end-user-relationships/#_blank) ([http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-ways-to-forge-strong-end-user-relationships/#\\_blank](http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-ways-to-forge-strong-end-user-relationships/#_blank)), for example.

Those are good articles. They're nice articles.

This isn't one of those articles.

This is about arranging things so you never have to talk to users again. Which is impossible, granted. However, the Tooth Fairy told me that the following listicle contains actions you can take that at least turn down the end-user auditory volume. That is desirable for all involved. After all, the end users told her they would sacrifice an eyetooth if the voodoo witch doctors were locked into a closet with their zombies and a garnish of fish poison.

So here's a few ways you can reduce interactions with those icky users—if not eliminate them completely.

## Set up a human firewall

Consider Eva Doyle, MBA, leadership consultant and author of ["The Reluctant Leader: From Technical Expert to Human Expert"](http://amzn.to/2woEWvx) (<http://amzn.to/2woEWvx>). Doyle became a human firewall kind of by accident. A former [help desk staffer](https://insights.hpe.com/articles/help-for-the-help-desk-1703.html) (<https://insights.hpe.com/articles/help-for-the-help-desk-1703.html>), trainer, and IT program manager, Eva

and her husband had moved overseas. He worked for the government, which qualified her for spousal employment (<https://www.uscis.gov/policymanual/HTML/PolicyManual-Volume12-PartG-Chapter4.html>).

Given that Doyle had been a software trainer, the government figured a systems administrator gig would be "a great fit." In fact, it was a great fit, but only after she offered to be the front (wo)man to help triage customer needs. "I let the real Unix admins know the urgency of the server problems that I didn't know how to fix. As in, 'There's a problem with the kernel? Are we talking about popcorn?'"

Being a Microsoft Office pro, Doyle also managed to insert herself between, shall we say, "misguided" users and the other sysadmins. Of course, it was the same deal as any support situation: Many people she dealt with didn't know anything about computers and weren't all that interested in learning. So the users would walk up and say, "I need XYZ" instead of describing the problem or, more usefully, what they aimed to achieve.

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Eventually, using her best bedside manner, she would get the users to describe what they wanted to achieve. And that's when Doyle told them that, O, happy day! they already had what they needed. She'd show them how program scripts work in Excel, for example.

When Doyle first arrived on the job, there was a lot of anger in the user community, matched with indifference to the sentiment in the admin shop. Much of it had to do with a miserable mismatch between what her colleagues knew about Word (not much) and what users needed to get done with it (a lot). Say, for example, a guy trying to format text in Word asked a sysadmin for help, who told him, "Don't use Word. Use text files." ...Whaaaa? "Those guys didn't use Office Suite," Doyle said. "They were writing Perl scripts, not trying to set up spreadsheets and PowerPoint."

The aftermath of establishing a human firewall between users and Unixers: After a while, the rest of the sysadmin team began to comment about how much happier the users seemed with Eva's office. "Not that they really cared about that," Doyle says, "but they noticed."

That happiness floated up the organization chart. Imagine the boss calling for support and saying he couldn't print a document (which he needed in order to brief a general in the U.S. Army). A sysadmin's answer was to go to the boss's office to take apart the printer. On the other hand, when Doyle got a call from the chief's assistant, she ran upstairs, rerouted the printer, printed the document on another printer, and ran back up to hand the boss his documents so he could get out of the door in time for his meeting.

Sweet, eh? And that is just one example of all the times when it's a blessing for both end users and tech pros to not deal with each other.

A word to the wise about human firewalls, though: They're good to keep the less end-user-tolerant staff from sputtering things like "That's a stupid idea, and I cannot believe you said it." But sometimes training is necessary, because the human firewall serves both the users and the tech staff.

As one tech pro pointed out, the liaison should not repeat dumb or irresponsible ideas, with a dollop of "Well, that's what the users want!" Did a client suggest changes two days before ship date? Repeat after me, human firewall: "Sorry, it's frozen."

## Establish hybrid human/remote tech support

Or, as e-fulfillment center [ShipMonk](https://www.shipmonk.com/) (<https://www.shipmonk.com/>) puts it, you need a "Happiness Engineer." ShipMonk runs the warehousing operations for e-commerce companies, syncing its customers' online shopping carts through a custom API integration to automatically import orders, and then picking, packing, and shipping each order.

The HE role was the creation of one Augustin Kennady, who built the system and then was thanked with a promotion to media relations director. The Happiness Engineer, like the human firewall, acts as a liaison. In the warehouse business, that means someone to link and smooth communication among warehouse staff, ShipMonk's technology team, and the end users—in this case, the e-commerce shops.

Many e-commerce entrepreneurs had pressing questions directly for the warehouse and tech teams. ShipMonk learned that the skills that matter in warehouse management and programming don't necessarily translate to customer relations. "As such, the Happiness Engineer is something of a hybrid support rep, account manager, and interdepartmental liaison," Kennady says.

ShipMonk uses a desk ticketing system (in its case, [Freshdesk](https://freshdesk.com/) (<https://freshdesk.com/>), a cloud-based support system), a chat tool ([Slack](https://slack.com/) (<https://slack.com/>)), and phone lines that go directly to one specific Happiness Engineer per client. This way ShipMonk can guarantee that the customers are always dealing with the right person.

The HEs regularly handle e-commerce clients who use platforms that they don't know very well—WordPress, Magento, WooCommerce, and the like. Sometimes the clients just don't know how to integrate into ShipMonk's fulfillment and inventory management service. Those clients have clients themselves, of course, so HEs get buyers' problems dumped in their laps, too.

For example, somebody orders a product from an e-commerce site that is accidentally shipped to an old address. Previously, somebody had to call the warehouse—directly—and ask if they could reroute the package while it was en route. That didn't work very well. "Sometimes, they'd be rather gruff," Kennady says.

Worse: Nobody was happy. A large client with a reasonable, urgent request couldn't reach the CEO. Instead, the client contacted the warehouse team, which didn't understand the problem's complexity; it was, in fact, a query more geared to front-office operations. With no point of contact between the front office and the warehouse, there was no Happiness Engineer, and thus, there was no happiness. It was smoothed over, but as Kennady says, "That was the come-to-Jesus moment."

You might wonder, by now, how a company recruits an HE, or a human firewall, for that matter. Kennady says the company had zero HEs in January 2016, and they're up to five now. It's a diverse group, coming primarily from customer-facing roles, such as customer support or retail. Kennady was an online tutor when he was hired by ShipMonk as a warehouse associate.

The Happiness Engineer acts as filtration and a single point of contact for the client. That avoids inundating and overwhelming warehouse people, and ensures that issues are evaluated, tracked, sent to the right department, and followed up with. "It doesn't necessarily cut back on the amount of fixes the tech team has to deal with, but it does streamline it, so things don't get lost in the shuffle. Much noise is eliminated," says Kennady.

Technology can help, and you can choose from plenty of remote user support tools. Here's a good article on [how to use TeamViewer for user support \(https://blog.teamviewer.com/5-ways-to-proactively-solve-end-user-problems-with-remote-software-support/#\\_blank\)](https://blog.teamviewer.com/5-ways-to-proactively-solve-end-user-problems-with-remote-software-support/#_blank), for example. As Kennady noted, HEs still deal with end users, but at arm's length, and at least you can direct them to the right person.

Which, fortunately, usually is not you.

## Nifty remote management tricks

Sure, there are plenty of remote user support tools, but a few outfits are doing some fine tweakage to ramp up the "do not talk to end users more than necessary" wattage. Bob Herman, co-founder and president of IT services firm [IT Tropolis \(http://www.ittropolis.com/\)](http://www.ittropolis.com/), accomplished this by configuring the company's remote management tool with a one-click option for the user to "Get Help by Emailing Screenshot."

"In many cases, a user issue or question relates to an error or other dialog box that has popped up on their screen," Herman says. Instead of expecting (or permitting) users to call the system administrator, and then trying to describe what he sees, a "send the screen shot" option provides a quick, easy way to request help. And it does not require a phone call that consumes tech support time explaining what happened.

The option takes a screenshot of the user's computer screen, opens the user's default email client, attaches the screenshot, and away it goes to the IT Tropolis ticketing system. Most of the time, the tech support agents can understand the issue from the screenshot. They can simply reply with the resolution, or remotely connect to the computer to fix the issue. Users save time, and tech support agents operate more efficiently.

Nice: No talkie, no rip out hair!

Tim Platt, vice president of IT for business services at [Virtual Operations \(https://virtops.com/\)](https://virtops.com/), an IT managed service provider, likes the company's remote monitoring and management (RMM) tool too. Ditto and hallelujah on the glory of remote remediation. But the first step to minimizing user interaction is actually having a global inventory of all your systems, he says, and that's another plus with an RMM tool.

You have to tell where the issue may occur, Platt says. "That requires a detailed inventory of the machines and their specific configuration. Once you understand the scope of the potential problem, you can create an automated fix—such as a [shell script \(https://insights.hpe.com/articles/16-linux-server-monitoring-commands-you-really-need-to-know-1703.html\)](https://insights.hpe.com/articles/16-linux-server-monitoring-commands-you-really-need-to-know-1703.html) or other automation," Platt says. "After the fix is created, you need a way to apply it, ideally in the background and without having to interrupt the end user."

It's not that they don't like their end users, Platt says. No, no, perish the thought! But those end users are busy, right? "It's better for them to focus on their work, not dealing with technology hassles. If you can leverage your RMM tool in this fashion, your labor time is decreased and end-user uptime is increased—and they may never be aware there was a problem looming!"

## **If all else fails, kill them with kindness (or scare them off)**

Remote support nirvana aside, sometimes users are unavoidably right smack dab in the same building as you. What do you do when they're breathing down your neck?

One support pro had [some dandy suggestions \(http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/solutions-to-the-top-10-peeves-of-a-support-tech/\)](http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/solutions-to-the-top-10-peeves-of-a-support-tech/). You could, for example, pick up an end user's computer and cart it off to your office to work on in private. Or you might try to assign them a role in the troubleshooting process, as in, "Here, Billy, why don't you try to replicate the issue on Sally's computer?" or "Hey, why don't you grab a notepad and take notes on what I'm doing?" ... which will maybe be beneficial or maybe cause them to flee.

It's win-win either way.

## **Alas, hiding is not a (permanent) solution**

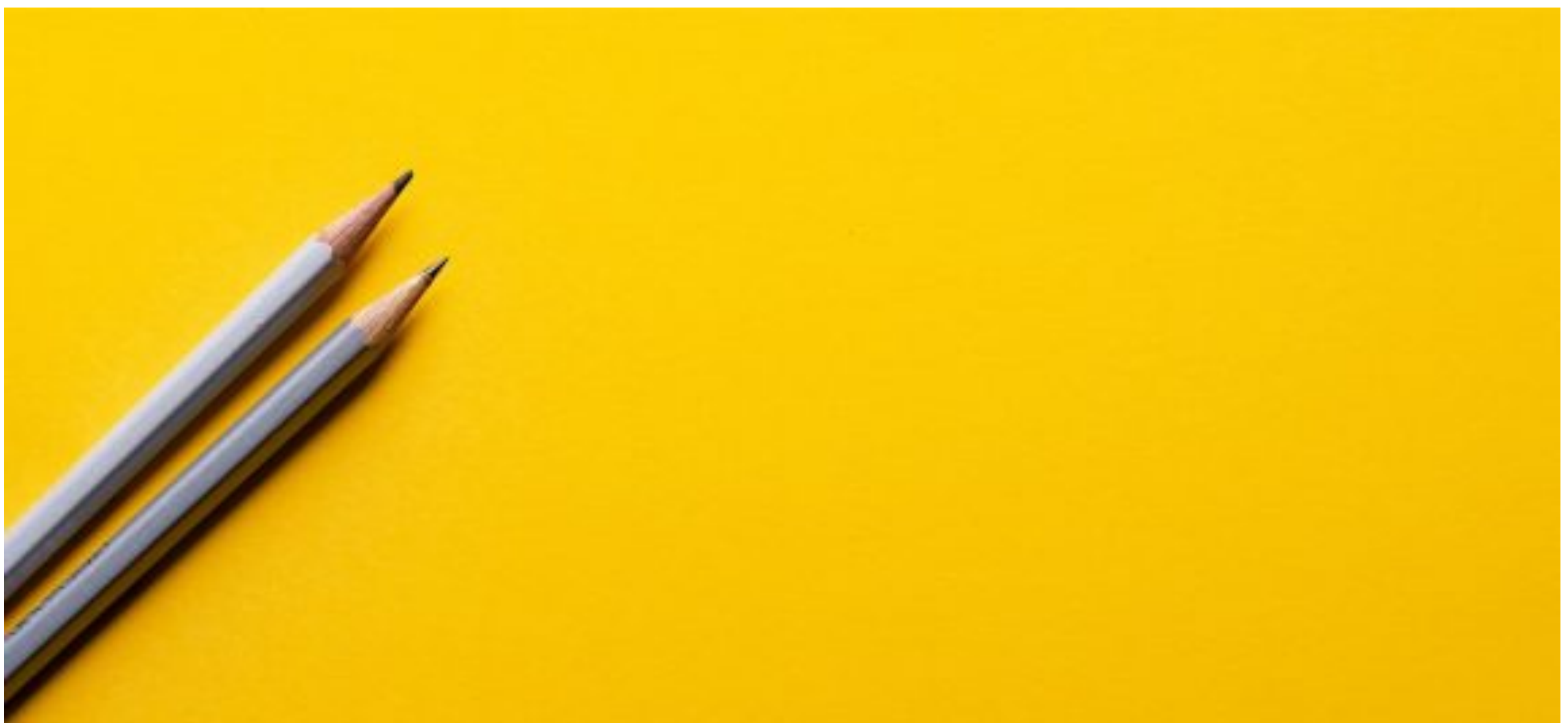
To borrow more wisdom for all you voodoo witch doctors from designer Solomon, make sure to keep in mind this simple formula: No end users = no customers = no \$\$\$\$. "Of course, anything that keeps you from making more money is annoying," Solomon says. "But dealing with clients in a respectful and helpful [manner] is part of doing business."

Yes, what he said. Being nice to end users is a crucial part of doing business, absolutely. No arguments here. But keeping the interaction to a bare minimum is a crucial part of maintaining sanity. If you can think of more ways to do it that don't involve locking yourself in the LAN closet or building a portable Faraday cage, let us know.

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