

# What you could learn from a computer technician



## Finer points of computing

Matt Joy, a computer consultant for Alaska Village Initiatives, offers pointers to Hazel Nelson, president Becharof Corporation. Joy's new column, *The Techno-babble Translator*, begins on page 3 of Data Tracks.

by B. Anne Hallman, CNA

I train people who have never used a computer before. New users often fear that they will hit some mysterious, special key that will cause the computer to lock up or even explode. Trust me, the machine won't explode. I've seen hundreds of keyboard and screen lock ups, none of which caused any damage to the computer (although some were a symptom of damage that already happened). Computer makers try to engineer their products to be more "idiot proof." But, they still can't protect their machinery from technicians who know, but forget, common repair measures.

I've seen the most damage done to computers by people trained to repair them. A computer network manager I know listen to a cassette player while he works. He keeps it in his shirt pocket. One day he put an important program on a floppy disk and stuck that in his pocket. His phone rang, the beginning of various distractions for the next two hours. When he had time to put the floppy disk into a sick machine to repair it, he discovered that the cassette player's electrical field had erased the disk.

Another network manager loves to tell a story about computer shopping. Since he was interested in making a large purchase, a store manager was eagerly showing off top-of-the-line equipment, explaining how simple it was to maintain. To demonstrate his point, the manager pulled out one of the circuit boards inside the machine's case. But the manager forgot that this computer was powered on. Every board in the expensive computer blew out, as electricity surged through it,

creating a nice shower of sparks like a miniature fireworks display.

An amazing number of malfunctions are due to loose or unplugged connections, but technicians forget this. In one class I took, my formerly 256-color video monitor had a blue screen after my instructor "broke" it, but otherwise it worked perfectly. None of the fancy software tricks I knew fixed it. Finally, my instructor showed me the video cable plugged into the back of the computer was, despite its looks, not pushed all the way in.

To avoid and solve simple computer problems:

1. Make sure all computer components, including floppy disks, are away from strong electrical fields, like those generated by telephones and televisions. Keep all parts dry, clean and free of grease and dust.

2. Nowadays, it is simple to upgrade computers by buying new, modular circuit boards. Follow manufacturer's installation instructions carefully (so you can blame *them* if their product doesn't work).

3. Don't forget basic electrical safety procedures: unplug everything before you open the case and ground yourself to the computer's frame before handling circuit boards. They can be ruined by static which humans can't see or feel.

4. If your computer quits or locks up, save your work (if you can), close any running programs, and turn the computer off with the power switch. Wait 10 seconds and turn it on again. This often solves those problems caused by "gremlins."

5. Check all plug-ins and connections to make sure they weren't accidentally loosened.