
Keeping Up With Office Technology as Laboratory Research Expands

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This article was published in the March 7-13, 2005 issue of [Mass High Tech](#).

As life sciences firms and their laboratories grow increasingly automated, equipment failures and system problems become commonplace. In larger work environments, daily struggles with technology are routine. Simple, standalone devices are a dying breed being replaced by intelligent, networked systems.

The lack of interoperability among this smorgasbord of products from multiple vendors is often a source of problems and frustration. Rapid technological advancement has its price.

The never-ending push to replace manual research activity with laboratory automation results in an increasing variety of devices and corresponding vendor management issues.

You'll need help from your vendors in solving problems quickly and the more you know about their problem resolution processes, the faster you'll be up and running again.

Many common equipment problems are caused by improper installation, maintenance and training. Try to avoid these all too common scenarios:

- Poor ventilation causes equipment overheating.
- Inadequate preventive maintenance induces premature failure.
- Electrical power fluctuations damage circuitry.
- Poor network wiring causes signal quality issues.
- Bypassing security protocols exposes confidential information.
- User error due to inadequate training, fatigue or stress results in service calls.

Vendors of life sciences firms also face a variety of internal issues that make supporting their products more difficult than you might think. Supporting products in the field boils down to managing three major areas:

1. **Hardware Changes** – Companies continue to improve the hardware designs long after products ship. Changes can be triggered by safety or reliability problems, the need to reduce manufacturing costs, or component obsolescence.
2. **Software Updates** – The need to patch security vulnerabilities, so vital in biotech and other life sciences firms, or to make improvements or fix bugs generates software changes. Events beyond the vendor's control often force such changes, for example, new versions of software modules licensed from third-parties.
3. **Customer Support Inquiries** – All intelligent devices require customer support services. Many customer inquiries are prompted by simple problems such as a DOA (dead-on-arrival) unit or a user error. Other inquiries result from complex system malfunctions requiring technical analysis.

So how do life sciences vendors manage these three areas of change? The typical vendor operating model for maintaining and supporting products in the field revolves around the following functions:

- Logging customer calls and capture information
 - Tracking and managing problems using all available data
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- Spotting trends that show recurring problems and their resolutions
- Identifying potential training areas
- Isolating potential failure points
- Collecting information about how products are actually used
- Escalating serious problems and those that are slow in being resolved
- Generating management reports for evaluating product and service quality

You can help your vendors improve quality. Here are six tips for getting help that will benefit both your company and its vendor:

1. Be polite and courteous. Control your emotions. This is a business conversation, not talk radio. Support staffers are not perfect and only human. If you give them an attitude, they will have to waste time dealing with you, not your problem.

2. Be prepared and concise. Before the call, take the time to write down pertinent information about your equipment, configuration, software, and the chain of events leading up to the problem. If there appear to be multiple problems, break them out separately. Minimize attempts at diagnosing the condition(s) and just stick to the facts.

3. Let the support staffer control the call. Basic information about you and the equipment must be gathered before troubleshooting can begin. There is always a process that must be followed and it is best to follow along rather than argue. Answer questions with adequate detail but don't ramble. Give the staffer time to type notes. Ask your questions after the staffer has finished asking questions.

4. Listen carefully and take notes. It's important to follow instructions during and after the call. Read or repeat back your understanding of the instructions. Do not second-guess the support center.

Even if you believe you have already tried something, the sequencing of steps can make all the difference.

5. Be understanding on callbacks. Chances are you will get a different person should you need to call back. Give the staffer time to read the call history. Ask if there are any questions regarding the history. Proceed to explain what actions you took and what results you observed after the last call using your notes.

6. Persist in getting the problem solved. In most cases, the support center will have dealt with similar problems before (even if the person you are speaking with has not). There will be other times when your problem is particularly complex or obscure. Most support centers use a tiered system whereby the front-line responders can escalate the call if they cannot resolve the problem. Once you've done what the front-line support staff has asked without success, ask for escalation. Be polite and persistent.

Information and instrumentation technologies will not get simpler any time soon but having a general idea about how vendors support their customers' needs puts those who need help in a better position to actually get it. And in this early stage of their industry, with so much competition in play, life science companies need to give themselves all the help and genuine support they can find.

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