



Revenge of the **nerds**

Leading business is dependent on tech geeks and nerds – and don't they know it. A new book suggests ways to keep them in line, motivated and on your side. **DEREK PARKER** reports



Mankind has been devising methods to keep the workers in check from the moment the first primate realised a big stick could be used to bludgeon some poor bugger into submission. Bosses, over time, have refined their system of control – moving from slavery to sweatshops to enterprise bargaining. Lackeys are now valued not just for their brawn, but for their brain. Valuing staff because of their ability to think, however, has opened a can of worms for modern employers. Managers are now struggling to control a new breed of thinkers, the IT geeks and nerds. As the basis of business shifts to the use of knowledge, creativity and technical expertise, these wiz kids have become the key asset. They are the people who provide the technological advances that give an organisation a business edge over its rivals.

Managing geeks – both to keep them and to utilise their abilities to best advantage – is emerging as a key issue for executives, according to a new book, *Leading Geeks: How to Manage and Lead People Who Deliver Technology*, by Paul Glen, a management consultant and academic (and a geek himself).

Glen notes that in the US demand for computer nerds outstrips supply; the same is true in Australia, according to professionals in the field.

"There has always been a shortage of people who are highly skilled in the IT area," says Michelle Fayle, manager of technology at recruiting firm Michael Page. "But in Australia it's become even more pronounced in the past year, especially in areas relating to software architecture, data warehousing, and business intelligence."

Glen argues that geeks require different working structures. In part, this is due to the nature of geekwork, which is highly technical in nature (but with a strong element of creativity within the technical framework), and partly because of the

nature of geeks themselves, who define themselves through their technical abilities.

Non-geek workers respond to incentives such as money and the prospect of advancement. Disincentives such as the possibility of demotion or dismissal are also important. By and large, they accept the workplace as organised by hierarchy, and they generally understand the goals of the business.

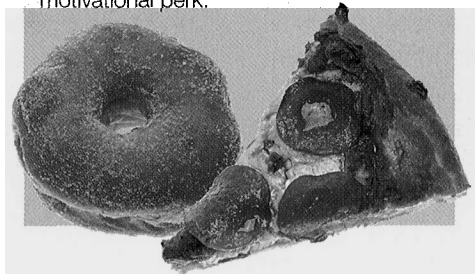
Nerds respond to a different set of carrots, and the key is their need for technical challenge. Glen notes that geeks will often work ludicrously long hours on projects that interest them. But this points to a related problem.

"Don't confuse this with being consumed by their work," says Glen. "It's the toys that consume them, not the work. Work is the means to the end. The passion is not so much about what technology can do, but the joy in understanding how it works."

Lindsay Doig, FCPA, chair of the e-business cell in the CPA information management and technology centre of excellence, agrees.

SNACK POWER

"I can't offer any rational explanation," says Glen, "but for geeks, even those making sizable incomes, free food is a major motivation – far more than an equivalent amount of cash. It may be due to the long hours or to some primitive instinct related to feeding together, but if you occasionally fill the office with soft drinks, snacks, pizza and beer, the productivity boost far exceeds the cost. However, if you always have free food around, it seems to lose its motivational value. Geeks start to view it as a fundamental human right rather than a motivational perk."



"They often have a problem in finishing," he says. "If a project involves, say, developing a complex operating program and then writing the supporting documentation explaining it, you're likely to get the first part but not the second."

Doig notes that providing careful specifications to a project can get around this problem in some cases, but can be counterproductive in others. "After all, you hire these people to produce solutions that other people can't see," he says. "If you want them to do that, you have to give them a degree of freedom, but within a framework of challenge."

Motivation

For the techies, the personal motivator is the acquisition of knowledge as an end in itself. Corporate goals are unlikely to be important to them. Often geeks do not recognise that someone has the right to give directions simply because they are higher in the corporate hierarchy. There is often little or no sense of loyalty to the organisation, although geeks can be fiercely loyal to each other, and often see the world as a sort of us-versus-them battlefield.

Trying to enforce acceptance of business objectives by sheer authority does not work with geeks. Glen notes that geek teams have been known to mutiny by simply failing to work as directed. Or they might simply leave, knowing that there are many other companies that require their skills.

Their emphasis on technical understanding means geeks can be extremely argumentative and stubborn over issues that they see as their domain, but Glen believes their thinking isn't always logical. "Regardless of how smart geeks are, it's important to keep an eye out for statements that substitute opinions for facts," he notes. "They can have a tin ear for other views."

Many nerds have an astounding lack of social acumen. If asked for a technical assessment of a problem, they are likely to give it as they see it – without tact, subtlety, or regard for the feelings of the

➤ recipient (even if the recipient is an important client or senior executive).

Broader view

Despite the problems, Glen believes that managing geeks can be done in ways that are successful to all concerned. He notes that the desire of geeks for intellectual challenge can be used to provide them with a broader view of the organisation, if suitable to the individual.

"It pays to carefully examine what advancement means for geeks," Glen points out. "Too often, people associate advancement with movement into positions such as project manager or team leader, but what geeks often value is the opportunity to explore different project roles. So for someone who has been programming for a long time, doing a stint as a system architect or as client liaison may be more interesting and fulfilling than being a project manager. Managers need to work with individuals to explore their goals and help craft a career that makes sense."

Recruiter Michelle Fayle notes that geeks will look closely at companies before joining, assessing them for tech potential.

"Some technical people choose to move into management roles, and some have done very well," she explains. "But others choose to stay in technical areas, and see the development of their technical skills as paramount. They will look at a company not only to see what challenges it offers in actual work, but also to see what training opportunities are available, and where they might lead."

Glen believes that geek groups realise the need for non-geek leadership at some level. While geeks may focus on knowledge, there

is also a need for the process to be organised into projects, and for projects to have clear processes that describe team structure and objectives. In short, managers provide the operational framework in which geeks operate.

Within a team environment, the leader also assigns roles and demonstrates the connections between them, including the scheduling of resources. It should be remembered that what is obvious to other people is sometimes not clear to geeks: the assumptions that underlie a project must be made explicit.

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— PAUL GLEN, AUTHOR *LEADING GEEKS: HOW TO MANAGE AND LEAD PEOPLE WHO DELIVER TECHNOLOGY*

Geeks love intellectual games, and in a way the role of a leader is to turn geekwork into a game – a serious game, of course. The rules of the game have to be explained, and the measures of success established. The trick is to structure the game so that it achieves the broader corporate objectives while still being attractive to geeks.

Criteria of effectiveness

Managing these gifted but difficult people is certainly an effort, and it raises the question: is it worthwhile? The message of

Leading Geeks is that it is not only worthwhile but essential.

"Most new ideas include some information content within either the physical product or the production or its distribution," Glen concludes. "Geeks are essential to innovation, and innovation is essential to the future of all enterprises. The managerial imperative is to see that geeks are effectively integrated into the organisation and focused on appropriate tasks."

However, Lindsay Doig and Michelle Fayle point out that there are degrees of geekness, and that technical ability is not the sole criterion of being effective.

"Many companies that want people with technical skills realise that those skills are only useful if they can be connected to broad company objectives," says Fayle. "There is no point in having to devote huge managerial resources to supervising people; it can end up costing you more in the long run. Hard-core geeks, if that's what you want to call them, are probably better suited to a specialist IT company, where dealing with technical problems is their primary responsibility. A company that simply wants to develop and apply technology to operate more effectively might be better advised to trade off the last percentile of technical ability in order to get a good fit with the company." ■

LEADING GEEKS: HOW TO MANAGE AND LEAD PEOPLE WHO DELIVER TECHNOLOGY BY PAUL GLEN, JOSSEY-BASS, 2003, \$56.95. PAUL GLEN IS HEAD OF C2 CONSULTING, A US-BASED FIRM SPECIALISING IN THE IT FIELD (WWW.C2-CONSULTING.COM)

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FOR FURTHER READING ON MANAGING KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

- *Managing Einsteins: Leading High-Tech Workers in the Digital Age*, J.M. Ivancevich and T.N. Duening, McGraw-Hill, 2002.
- 'Managing Professional Intellect: Making the Most of the Best', J.B. Quinn, P. Anderson, and S. Finkelstein. *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 1996, pp 71-80.
- *Managing Technical People: Innovation, Teamwork, and the Software Process*, W.S. Humphrey, Addison-Wesley, 1997.