

By Jeff Dray

Requests for free tech support often catch you off guard and your first instinct is to accept the task. But taking on a free support job is often a significant commitment and can be a real headache. When someone makes an unwelcome request for free tech support, use a response from this list to politely, yet firmly decline the job.

Ten good reasons not to provide free tech support

Providing free technical support is often not worth the price you pay, either as a recipient or as provider. [This list](#) outlines ten good reasons to avoid providing free technical support.

1 **"There really isn't much I can do with this machine."** – This frequent situation occurs when someone wants to run high-end applications on a cheap, under-powered machine. Someone who just bought a 12-year-old 386 for £25 doesn't want to hear that it won't run Windows XP Professional. Many years ago, just to see what would happen, we took a hard disk from a 486 running Windows 95 and put it into a 286 with just 1 MB of RAM. To our surprise it didn't fall at the first hurdle, but it took nearly 15 minutes to boot. Clicking the start button, however, caused it to grind to a halt.

2 **"I really don't have time right now."** – Not a great excuse, as it often leads to the machine being left with you until you do have time. After tripping over it, bruising your shins, and learning a whole new repertoire of foul language, you take it apart to see what you can do, usually when you need to be doing something else.

3 **"This one is a bit beyond my capabilities."** – Known as the "professional suicide gambit with a double edged benefit", no self-respecting tech likes to use this admission of defeat. But it does have the benefit of closing the door on all future unofficial job requests. Unfortunately, it may also darken the reputation of anyone courageous¹ enough to use it.

¹ **Note:** In this context "courageous" means "stupid". The term "courageous" is used in the British Parliament where it is considered impolite to call one's colleagues stupid.

4 **"My employer insisted on me signing an exclusivity of service agreement."** – The response is a rather pompous line to take, and one that doesn't work with family and friends. It may however, be used in situations where a near stranger decides that you will do as a cheap technical support resource. After considerable persuasion they may be able to talk you into working for them at an hourly rate that would salve your conscience. Use this one if you don't mind people considering you a bit stuffy.

5 **"This job will be expensive."** – Advise the customer that the job will cost slightly less than the machine's replacement value and suggest that they consider purchasing a new system. Hopefully they will take your advice, buy a new PC, and leave you alone.

6 **"Great, you could help me with my <insert your own project that needs attention>."** – This reverse psychology technique is a great way to turn the tables on the person seeking free support. If the local house painter wants help with his PC, ask him to paint your windows in return. You can use this response for a whole range of services, including: a kitchen or bathroom remodel, car servicing, lawn care, and so forth. The barter system is also beneficial because in some locations (including the United Kingdom) it is outside the Income tax system. In the past I have had my garage door repaired in return for fitting a new hard disk and CD writer. People who don't agree to a fair, reciprocal service are trying to take advantage of your good nature.

Ten ways to decline a request for free tech support

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"I am not allowed to work on personal machines during work." – The worst favor seekers are coworkers who use the IT department as a source of free support for their personal systems. These requests can be a real headache if your employer takes exception to company facilities and time being used for private purposes--a very understandable position.

I remember one coworker who regularly asked us to work on her personal system. She insisted that, as she used it to work from home, we should be responsible for sorting out the horrible mess her children caused by loading a variety of dubious applications. We resolved the problem by passing the request to her department head so that he could agree to the cross charge. Not surprisingly he refused, saying she did very little work in the office and nothing from home.

8

"Why don't you take it to <insert the name of a trusted local repair shop>." – Let's not forget those techs who scratch a living from home PC users. Many of us have worked for small local repair shops and know that it can be a precarious way to make a living. Sometimes it can be tactful to suggest your local repair shop if you don't feel that you can't take a job on. Unless you routinely refer them ill-tempered customers, they'll likely be grateful for the business and may even reward you with a handsome discount.

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"I can't fix this problem without the original system disks." – This response works well when you know for sure that someone doesn't have a valid software license. I once encountered a customer with a special vendor locked edition of Microsoft Publisher. After we had replaced his processor and motherboard the locked version no longer worked. Without thinking, I blurted out that I had a normal version. I should have kept me mouth shut. The customer pursued me for weeks, until I told him a story about the disks being corrupt.

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"Just say 'No'." – This simple refusal is the most honest approach when declining a request for free support. You don't even need to justify your actions. You clock off at the end of the day, just as your colleagues do, and you're entitled to enjoy your free time. You may not want to spend all your waking hours obsessed by computers and the problems they produce. It is remarkable how easy we techs become somebody's best friend when they want a favor, yet as soon as they get what they want, we are forgotten until the next time they need something.



Jeff Dray has 15-years IT support and help desk experience. He currently works as a field engineer for Pitney Bowes in England and specializes in their IT products. He obtained his City and Guilds adult teaching certificate from Reading College where he served as help desk coordinator. Jeff also works as a freelance writer and is an avid sailing enthusiast.

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