When Speech, Um, Gets in the Way of, Ah, Getting Ahead

By Carrie Johnson
The Washington Post, Sunday, August 20, 2000; Page L01

Bob Kuhfahl is a certified geek. Literally.

He spent years designing computer networks and exchanging tips with other software developers. Along the way, he racked up degrees in computer science and technology management.

From the looks of it, he was well on his way to securing a promotion. But a few years ago, Kuhfahl realized that something was blocking his entry into the management ranks--his inability to engage co-workers and supervisors in conversation. Whenever he'd present the latest plans for a software product or meet a colleague in the hallway, Kuhfahl would pepper his sentences with distracting "ums" and "ahs."

His boss goes even further. "He was god-awful," said Kathy Clark, chief executive at Landmark Systems in Reston. "More than 50 percent of his vocabulary was 'ums' when he was public speaking."

Kuhfahl took the hint and joined a group of Landmark employees who meet twice a month to practice making speeches, running meetings and breaking the ice in conversations with office big shots. Four years later, his patter is devoid of those telltale "ums"--and he's become a software development manager.

"There's no question in my mind that to play an effective role in the upper ranks of the company you need to be persuasive," Kuhfahl said.

He's not alone. Many technically oriented people find their communications skills get in the way when they try to switch gears and zoom into higher-level jobs. What's changing is the number of techies who seek out communications training from universities, media consultants and grass-roots clubs such as Toastmasters International.

D.C.-based consultant Heidi Berenson said that an increasing number of her clients work in the tech sector. Berenson, a former television journalist, said executives from companies such as Scient, Nettel Communications and Sharing Technologies have visited her to practice making small talk at a cocktail party or to conduct mock interviews with reporters. She tells them getting to the point is of the essence.

"You really have only about nine seconds to grab your audience," she said. "You can't do the windup and the pitch. You just have to pitch."

The need to spice up conversations isn't confined to the executive suite. Officials at schools that attract a high quotient of engineers and computer scientists are emphasizing the ability to talk about what techies do and make. Since 1993, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has run a "charm school" for its undergraduate students, giving them a chance to practice business etiquette. The school also requires undergraduates to take courses in written and oral communications.

Lori Breslow, a senior lecturer at MIT's Sloan School of Management, said one of her students' biggest problems is losing track of the audience.

"It's the communicator's responsibility to make himself understood," said Breslow. "Many times they offer detail upon detail, when in fact what somebody wants to know is 'Is this going to make me money?' "

Breslow said that, growing up, she suffered from painful shyness. But, after finding an extroverted friend and watching the friend interact with other people, Berlow gradually became more comfortable in large groups.

"The basics of the skill are often in the observation of the other," said Breslow, who has emerged from her shell to help physics professors make eye contact with their students. "A lot can be taken from friendly people whose communication styles you admire and respect, watching how they do things and changing your response based on feedback."

That's the premise behind Toastmasters, a nonprofit group with chapters around the country, often organized around a particular workplace. Kuhfahl belongs to one at Landmark, as does his boss. David Bain, a Virginia businessman, started an Internet entrepreneur chapter of Toastmasters last year (www.ietoastmasters.org). Twice a month, the group gathers in Northern Virginia or the District to give short speeches and answer prepared questions, such as "Where do you fall in the controversy over Napster?"

Members evaluate one another's body language and verbal style, with one person looking out for "lapses of fluency," said member Ray Paseur. "We sometimes call that person 'the wizard of uh.' "

And he means it. In a telephone conversation, the Internet entrepreneur group's star student, Jeff Pledger, stopped himself in mid-thought to say, "Oh, okay, count that as one 'um.' " He laughed and noted that humor is also a good way to keep an audience's attention.

Pledger continued: "I'm not afraid of getting up in front of people. I'm an outgoing person. Being blind, I have to communicate in an effective manner."

Of course, some techies are happiest when they are solving complicated problems with their companies' servers or using their artistic skills to design Web sites. Even they could benefit from being better speakers, said Clark, chief executive at Landmark.

"Aside from the core technical skills, communication skills are the most important thing you need to have," she said. "So many people really underestimate those and do a bad job at them. The more rapid [technological] change becomes, the more important communications skills are."

Just ask Kuhfahl, who someday hopes to parlay his tech prowess and new-found communications acumen into a job as president or vice president of a technology company.

His boss said he's got a good shot.

"I'm convinced he's become a better manager," Clark said.

Instant Reply

Last week's column about a Maryland program called "Live Near Your Work" caught readers' attention. Some folks wrote in to express interest in bringing such a program to their offices, but one reader warned that such an approach could backfire on the highly mobile work force. "Especially with the high-tech crowd, moving close to your work can mean you have to move again when you lose your job or want to switch jobs," she wrote.