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Computer glitches spawn new industry

Geeks find steady supply of vexed users who need house calls

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By Katherine Seligman

SAN FRANCISCO -- It was early evening by the time the rental geek headed to his last job at the end of a rough day. He was behind schedule, and, worse, he'd lost his cell phone, the lifeline that connected him to his stable of clueless clients.

"It's been a damage control week," he said, the closest he gets to complaining.

His motto, after all, is, "We've wasted countless hours learning this stuff so you won't have to." This "we" is Alec Bennett, proprietor of Rent a Geek, the business he founded four years ago after his dot-com employer succumbed to the dot-com crash.

It didn't take long after losing that job for him to realize his plight wasn't so bad. There were lots of digitally challenged people out there who needed him. They had computers suffering from viruses, e-mail problems and inexplicable crashes that eradicated their tax records, calendars or address books.

In fact, there was too much business. Computer frustration has become a modern plague, aggravated by a proliferation of computer chip-driven gadgets, all with disparate multipage directions, cords, vocabularies and manufacturers, some with 24-hour help lines that require that much time to reach. Together, they've fueled a cottage industry of home geeks, computer technicians who will make house calls.

About two-thirds of Americans used the Internet in 2003 -- 87 percent of them through connections at home -- according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Although there is no estimate of the number who couldn't master their computers, academic and anecdotal evidence abounds. Anger and frustration with computers can even escalate into what one psychologist calls "computer rage."

"Computer rage is becoming a big problem in our world today," University of Maryland professor Kent Norman says on a section of his Web site devoted to the subject. "Men and women are taking out their frustrations on the computer; and unfortunately, sometimes misdirecting it to other people."

Norman developed some techniques for handling the rage, which, bottled up, can lead to "techno-frustration denial" and inappropriate behavior, such as taking anger out on a spouse. He advocates some healthy "vicarious venting," which he demonstrates in video clips in which he bashes, burns and barbecues old computer parts.

"You really have to be careful with this stuff," Norman said in an interview.

But he understands what drives these cathartic acts. Computer programs being used at home were generally designed for business use, he said. Only a geek would have the knowledge and patience to fix programs, eradicate viruses and rescue data after a crash.

"It's this incredible amount of frustration trying to deal with something that's not designed well and is in fact incredibly unreliable," Norman said.

Greg Turner, of San Francisco, said his computer got sacked by a virus in February. While he was not tempted to destroy it, he said, he considered getting rid of the computer because it kept going blank, then turning to a screen where it dumped memory and couldn't be turned off.

"I had friends who said they were going to come over and help me and never did," said Turner, who finally hired Rent a Geek. "They are high-tech people, but they don't keep their promises."

In Norman's survey, computer users were most often annoyed by e-mail snafus, waiting while a computer completed a simple task, having to redo something because of a glitch and having to upgrade obsolete programs. Microsoft ranked high among the objects of their ire. But with the increased popularity of wireless networks, DVD players and game systems, the possibilities for irritation are endless.

Robert Stephens, who believes he was the original home geek, began tapping into this cauldron of frustration 11 years ago as a student at the University of Minnesota when he founded the Geek Squad. By the end of the 1990s, his clients included the Rolling Stones, U2 and Madonna tours.

Best Buy, figuring he'd come up with a good idea, bought the business and in 2004 installed rentable geeks in all its 668

stores in the United States. Called Double Agents, they follow a geek dress code, accented with clip-on ties and white tube socks and drive VW Bugs emblazoned with the company logo. This spring, the company is even opening a stand-alone Geek Squad store in San Jose, Calif., in the heartland of home computer expertise.

"Not all geeks are created equal," Stephens said. "We like to think we attract the best ones."

The independents generally adhere to their own code on this matter. They don't trash each other, although they hear the stories about geeks who couldn't do the job or neighborhood repair shops that offered lifetime guarantees, then went out of business. But they tend to roll their eyes at what some call the "McGeeks" at Best Buy and corporate digiticians at other electronics stores.

"Right now, there is no reason to work for them," Bennett said. "If you're any good, you can just do it on your own."

However, he said, he sees the proliferation of geek services as "a good thing. There is enough work out there for everybody. It's just that it's like the Wild West. You never know what you're going to get."

He is joined by Dr. Geek, Geek for Hire and Computer Nerd for Hire, to name a few in the Bay Area, all of whom insist they don't speak in computerese and charge between \$25 and \$60 an hour. At one point, there was even another Rent a Geek in San Francisco, but he agreed in a civilized phone conversation, said the bona fide owner of the title, "to just cease and desist."

"He was a flyer guy," Bennett said. "I'd never hang flyers on poles."

Instead, like many independents, he advertises solely on Craigslist. By 8 a.m., said Victor Chargin of San Jose, who calls himself "The Last Computer Man You Will Need," there sometimes are already 30 postings advertising rental geeks. He has to get up early to post his own ad.

"I started doing this because someone charged me a huge amount of money to repair my computer," said Aaron Weinberg of Oakland, the Computer Nerd for Hire, who is self-taught. "I decided I wasn't going to pay \$60 or \$80 to fix my computer."

Bennett, who is 35, also learned about computers by experimenting with them. What started as a childhood passion eventually landed him -- after studying journalism and philosophy at New York University -- at Mondo Media, a San Francisco company that put flash cartoons on the Internet.

Like many technophiles who flooded the Bay Area during the dot-com frenzy, he lost his job in 2001 when the market crashed. But unlike others who loaded up the U-Haul and headed home, he stayed.

His new enterprise, with a mix of small business and individual clients, paid for itself immediately. Overhead -- living with roommates South of Market and driving an old meter-maid cart -- was low. And the work left time for other pursuits and inventions. He is, after all, a geek at heart.

Without the freedom, he might have never figured out how to convert old arcade machines into computers or perfected his door cam, a device that not only allows him to talk in strange voices to people outside, but also to tape them and set the scene to music on his Web site. Or designed a universal complaint line he hopes to house in a booth outside so anyone on the street can pick up the phone and talk to people calling in complaints about anything. Or worked on a photographic beer dispenser.

"That way, we have a photo record of people who want beer," he said. "We can put it up on the Web and see when the big beer-drinking time is and who drinks it. You could discover patterns."

What grabs him, Bennett said, is the interaction between these devices and people. The technology, to him, is a riddle. If others can't figure it out -- and the big computer companies aren't making it easier, he says -- then his job is safe, at least for now.

"Someday I'll look around and say I had it and I should have worked it harder," he said one recent day, sitting in a dilapidated wheelchair on his rooftop patio. "But I have more than enough work. I can't see doing this in five years. There are other things I'd like to do. I just know I never want to work for someone else again."