

Human Infrastructure 85: Document So You Can Go On Vacation



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Document So You Can Go On Vacation

Ethan Banks

Documentation is an ingrained part of my work life. From force of habit, I create a process whenever I'm doing something that took a bit of time to sort out.

What's In My IT Process Documents?

1. **Context.** When writing a process document, remember that your audience hasn't been where you have, which is why they are reading your doc. For technical people, understanding why they are doing something often answers many other

questions that might come up. It's worth writing a few sentences to explain the context.

2. **Reasoning.** As the document progresses, I'll often explain my logic for executing a step in one way or another. I might mention the risks of choosing a specific option. This educates the reader so that they are not only following steps, but are also learning along the way.
3. **Process.** Many of the documents I write are procedures, where several steps are required to complete the task. I make clear distinctions between each part of the process. Simple enumeration (1, 2, 3, etc.) works best for me.
4. **For more info.** In the theme of educating the reader, I document where I found all of the information to being with. Let's say the process is about standing up a routing adjacency with a particular set of options. I'll include links to the vendor docs that explain the scenario. If you found a kernel of wisdom on a forum or blog, consider copying & pasting the important text to go with the link. Forums and blogs have a way of disappearing from the Internet.
5. **Simple language.** Documentation is not the place to write in an elevated style. Don't attempt to impress the reader with your brainpower. You're enabling the reader to perform a task confidently, so use clear, simple language. If you're a new author, give your process to a co-worker see what questions they have. Update your doc to answer or eliminate those questions.
6. **Collaboration.** When writing a document for your organization, that doc is for the benefit of everyone. Your mindset should be that the doc belongs to the company, not you. In that context, documentation is collaborative. Others on your team should feel free to refresh documentation as needed.
7. **A helpful title.** Write a title that's as concise as it can be while still explaining what the document contains. "Email Doc" is a terrible title. "How To Flush Stuck Outbound Messages From The Internet Mail Queue" is more descriptive without being too long.
8. **Marketing.** While you're not trying to sell your document, you do need to market it so that your co-workers know of the available resource. Shine a light on your document. Feature it on the front page of the wiki site. Send an e-mail to the group. Mention it in a team meeting. No one will benefit from your document if they don't know it's there.

Now Go On Vacation

The upshot of good documentation is that it's a stand-in for you. When you are out of the office for travel or personal time, you want to be bothered as little as possible. If you can refer your co-workers to a document, they can "bother" the document.

If you're fortunate, your co-workers will update the document themselves over time, disconnecting the process from you individually. You don't want to be forever involved in a process just because you're the first one to figure it out. When documentation is part of your IT team's psyche, everyone creates, refers to, and maintains documentation, taking joint ownership of processes.

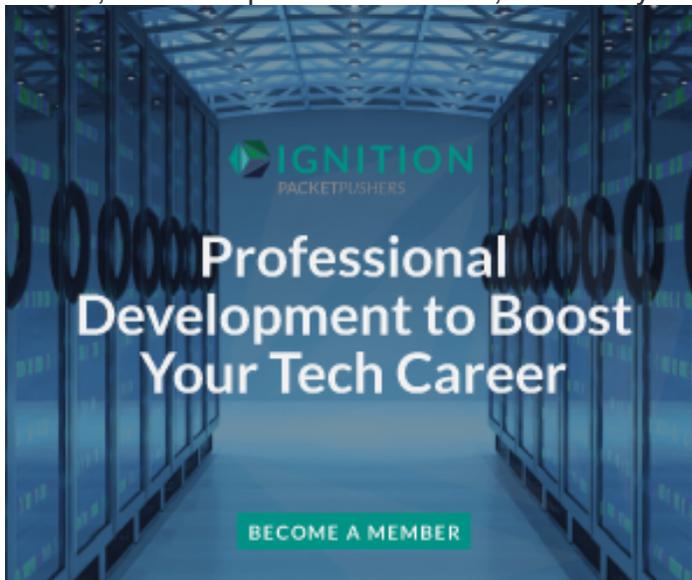
If you're in management and don't see documentation happening on your team, foster it through example. Start writing documentation, and encourage your team to do the same. Living documentation should become the operations handbook of your organization. It should survive staff turnover and be a ready resource as team members come and go.

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The Limits Of Tech To Solve Social & Political Problems

Drew Conry-Murray

Wired has [an interesting story](#) about a company offering free facial recognition software to schools. The software is meant to help reduce school shootings.

I appreciate the company's altruism and impulse to do something. The problem is the company's trying to apply a technological fix to problem whose root causes are social, political, and human.

Treating The Symptoms

Rob Glaser, the man who owns the company offering the software, believes it will be easier to build consensus around facial recognition as a safety mechanism than it will to build consensus around measures such as gun control.

I think he's right about gun control: firearms regulation is one of the most divisive issues in the United States.

But whether or not you can build consensus around facial recognition software, the real question is whether it will actually improve school safety.

In Glaser's scenario, adults voluntarily register their faces with the system. When an adult visits the school, if that person is in the database, the school gate would automatically unlock after the adult looks into a camera.

As a safety measure, this has several drawbacks.

First, the majority of school shootings are conducted by students who attend the schools they attack. For example, [a study published in 2000](#) (PDF) by the Department of Education and the Secret Service showed that students perpetrate 95 percent of all school shootings.

Thus, a database of adult images would have very little impact. And even if you extended the database to include students, those students are, by definition, supposed to have access to the school.

Second, just because an adult has volunteered to be in a database doesn't say anything about that adult's intent or state of mind, and how their intent or state of mind might change over time.

Third, what are the security procedures for adults who aren't in the database? Does the school go on lockdown? Is law enforcement summoned? Or does a staffer in the front office just buzz the person through?

None of these responses will do much to make the school a safe and secure environment.

Aside from these drawbacks, the Wired article also points out accuracy problems with facial recognition systems, particularly for black faces; the potential for misuse of surveillance technologies; and a lack of guidelines or regulations on how to implement and use these technologies.

Security Blanket

School safety and gun rights are part of a gnarly, complex social and political problem with deeply entrenched positions. That seems unlikely to change.

So if we as a society can't act in concert to solve a problem through social or political means, why not see what technology can do?

People take comfort in technology, especially if it's a complex system. Throw in a few magic words like 'algorithm' and 'artificial intelligence' and you're on your way. Like a modern-day crucifix or clove of garlic, we put faith in technology to keep the monsters at bay.

And hey, at least we're doing *something*, right?

No. Facial recognition won't measurably reduce the risk of school shootings. That's because the risk isn't tied to a person's identity.

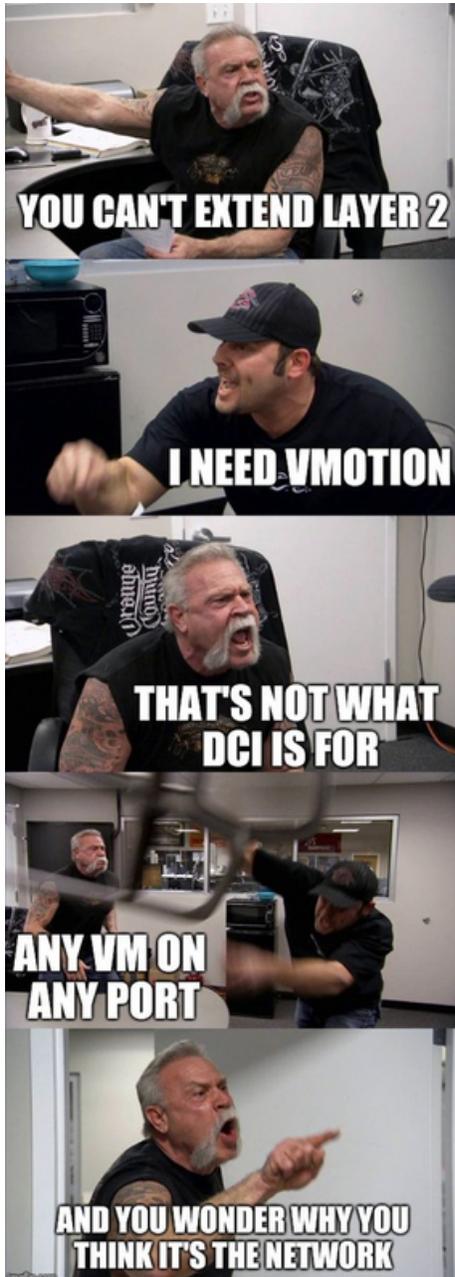
The risk is tied to murderous rage, or mental illness, or our human capacity for violence. It's also tied to the easy availability of weapons designed to inflict maximum carnage in a minimum of time. And it's tied to deep disagreements about rights.

In my opinion, facial recognition in schools is, at best, a liability shield. School districts that buy in can say "We took all reasonable precautions." And maybe that's a valid justification.

But aside from that, facial recognition is a technological security blanket; it doesn't really do anything, but we feel a little better when we huddle under it.

Thanks Internet!

Sometimes interesting things show up in our social media feeds. Here's one:



Product News

We get briefed on new products and other tech news. Sometimes they're worth writing about.

New Network OS From Startup Arccus Targets Whitebox Switching And Routing

The startup [Arccus](#) has launched a new network operating system (NOS) to compete with integrated network devices from Cisco, Juniper, and Arista; as well as standalone commercial and open source NOSs.

Arccus's NOS, called ArcOS, is designed to run on whitebox switches and routers. It supports silicon from Broadcom, including the StrataDNX Jericho+ and StrataXGS Trident 3 chipsets, and well as Trident 2 and Tomahawk.

[LINK](#)

Cato Networks Incorporates User Identity Into SD-WAN Policies

Cato Networks can now [incorporate user identity](#) into its SD-WAN policies. This gives network operators and administrators more options to align network policies with business outcomes.

Administrators can now use data points such as a user's role, group, or department around which to build SD-WAN rules.

[LINK](#)

Corvil Intelligence Hub Brings Machine Learning To Network Data

Corvil, which makes the Corvil Analytics appliances that gather network data, has announced a new software product called [Intelligence Hub](#). Intelligence Hub uses machine learning to spot anomalies and extract business-relevant information from network data captured by Corvil.

[LINK](#)

The End Bit

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