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Job Description

Information systems technicians work to establish and maintain local area networks (LANs), Internet access, and other telecommunications systems within an institution or company, in this instance, the Naval command. They set up access to Internet, including e-mail. They troubleshoot automated data processing problems and maintain a variety of computer and computer-related devices such as printers, software devices inside a computer, hardware or internal drives, ensuring that people can remain online and productive.

CONCEPT: High-frequency communications

I started in radio communications. You deal with satellite communications, high frequency communications and a lot of secure communications being onboard a ship. We have to scramble a lot of our signals, pass information, intelligence over to the other commands and so while they decipher it and pass it along to their boss and so.

Say we're sitting on board a ship. How does this signal get from the ship over to the shore command? How do they find out what we talking about? And after reading the publications that they had on board the ship, it really dawned on me how everything works and what they taught us in A School, putting two and two together ... electrons and protons and all, how it all comes together.

Once I got in Radioman A School, all this stuff started coming hand in hand with what I learned in high school--I put that knowledge to use and I started learning about basic electricity, how that ties in with Ohm's law and all that. It [the science learned in high school] really plays a big part in our job because if you don't understand Ohm's law or don't know how to calculate certain things mathematics because our job details – deals with a lot of mathematics on antenna wave lengths and everything. If you [don't] know how to calculate the formula on how long a wave is or how far you are from a shore command and how much power or output you're putting out, you can burn up your lot of equipment out there.

I didn't think much about it when I was going through high school, but now I wish I had paid more attention back then because it [what we studied] plays a big part in our lives today.

The subjects I studied in high school I thought would be very important--back then I didn't think they were important, but now physics, calculus, geometry, algebra, and they helped me out a lot once I joined the Navy and stuff. And everything that I do in my communication field right now deals with mathematics, algebra, trigonometry, geometry, and physics.

WORK SKILLS: Working with people -- Language and culture

Once I finished Radioman A School, I was stationed over in the Philippines, and so I joined the Navy to see the world, so I'm finally going like 18-hour flight overseas somewhere I never been before. And it was a real challenging experience, you know. I experienced some different cultures, different languages. I think the first two or three months [I had] culture shock trying to get used to the people, the language, and the cultures over there. But it was very rewarding, though, and after I left--I was stationed there in 1982, left in 1983. That's when I first went to my first ship, which was the U.S.S. Blueridge stationed out of Yukoska, Japan. And I thought my first duty station was a culture shock. Well, this is a big culture shock trying to get adjusted to the languages, cultures, and else my first time ever being on a train system, so had to learn how to read the Japanese writing to determine which train I should catch to get back and forth to work. And the Japanese people, they were very friendly. They were trying to help you out as you go along and so I said, well, I guess I'll buy me a book since I'm going to be over here for three years, try to learn some of their languages, too. And I found when I was standing at the train station, they come-- some Japanese folks come up to you, try to practice their English on you while I'm trying to practice my Japanese, which was real fun and stuff. And I enjoyed it over there. I had a good time. That was my first ship. We got to travel to different places around the world. I've been to several ports up in Japan... Kuri, Japan. I went over to visit where they bombed Japan-- over there in Nagasaki, and we got to go visit a museum. We couldn't take pictures in there because of the devastation that happened and stuff. But people over there, they accepted what happened and they were very friendly toward us. It was a group tour and so it was-- they opened their arms up to show up what happened and everything. After there, I visit Singapore, a couple of places in Indonesia, Australia, Korea, Hong Kong and I got my wish. I got to see a lot of it. I know I wouldn't have been able to afford that on my own, which was real nice and so I took a lot of pictures, bought a lot of different things from each place that I went to, sent home to my mom. So she experienced some of the things that I went through as well, you know, by having pictures and different artifacts from that country.

I learned a little bit [of Japanese], just to get by, enough to know, go in a restaurant and order some food, know my way around the train system, how to count their money and everything. It was real nice, though, and challenging.

It was my first time seeing where I thought they were driving on the wrong side of the road. And they said they're not driving on the wrong side of the road; we are driving on the wrong side of the road. I said, okay. And when I first went up there to get in a taxi, the doors automatically opened and only reaching for the taxicab and the door hit me in my leg, and so say, that's the way we do things. It's automatic doors. And just by talking with the people, Americans tend to speak real fast and loud. [When] they're trying to practice their English with you, you have to speak real soft to them, real slow so they can catch on. It's like they're reading lips. And you go to a restaurant, you order food. You don't get a fork and so I'm sitting there trying to use chopsticks. I mean, it was—everybody-- the little kids come over. They look at us and start laughing because every time we put some rice or something up to our mouth, it falls out of there. But it was an experience, though.

WORK SKILLS: Working with people -- Experiencing other cultures

The most exciting thing I've done was when we were – I was on the ship, on the Blue Ridge. We went down to Sydney, Australia. Went down for their 75th anniversary and just getting off the ship, being in our uniform, our dress blues, watching the faces of the kids down there. We got off the ship. They came up and greeted us because it's probably been a while since they seen American faces down there actually in person. They thought we were movie stars or something like that, but it was really [exciting] to just bring a smile to them on their faces and stuff. And I get involved with like different things off the ship, you know. Go out there, help the needy and we painted a schoolhouse for these children over there in Australia when we was down there and once we finished, they came around, gave us water and sandwiches and stuff. And just seeing the faces-- their faces light up when we painted their playground equipment and everything, that was awesome. I was in awe.

WORK SKILLS: Working with technology -- Solving problems

One problem we ran into yesterday was [that we had] just purchased a printer, scanner, fax machine. I was trying to hook it up to our computer and every time we go into an MS-DOS based program, it wouldn't print out properly. So what we did was, first broke out the manual, read it and make sure all the peripheral devices was set up properly and once we did that, went into the diagnostic mode of the computer, made sure we had all our settings correct and the COM ports or LPT parallel ports set up properly and once we figured that out, it was just a matter of resetting the IRQs [Interrupt Service Requests] on the computer itself and we came back up.

WORK SKILLS: Working with people -- Teamwork under pressure

The Navy taught me a lot of values about teamwork. Everyone plays an important part of that team and stuff and without the team-- I mean, without you doing your part as a team, you might hurt the team and you fail in the long run.

When we were trying to get ship ready for commission, the U.S.S. Chief was up in Wisconsin and they came down, say we had to be out of there by the 11th of October. If not, we're going to winter over up there. And it was a lot of stuff that needed to be done on the ship, painting. The antennas weren't put back up in time. Right when we were leaving Wisconsin we were going through the locks. We were going up in Canada and everybody was doing their part of their jobs and stuff, but the deck boatswain mates, which are like the deck guys and stuff, they're out there trying to get the ship through these locks, which was very close. I mean, these guys been up like 13 hours a day and nighttime just trying to maneuver the ship through this small channel. And we all pitched in as a team, you know, because those guys, they were tired, and we were helping them do their jobs as well as doing our jobs. I really can't put it in perspective, but I saw how dreary and tired these guys were and I gave them a pat on the back. Yes, man, you guys doing a good job, you know. It was just telling somebody that they'd done a good job, showing them that you appreciate the work that they are doing. It helps them out, too, and it helps build morale, makes them want to keep going. But that was a challenging time. It took us three days to get through the channels up in Canada and stuff and these guys working 13, 15 hours a night with two or three hours of sleep, then had to go back out there and stand watches. That compelled me to go ahead and learn all about my rating plus their ratings as well so I can help them out and stuff in case one of them happen to fall down just being tired. I know I can be-- go in there and pick up his slack for him and stuff. And that helps out everybody, I guess, being onboard a ship, you know. If you have a fire out there, it's up to everybody on that crew to help put that fire out because being on the way in the middle of the ocean, you can't call the fire department or nobody to come help put this fire out.

Back in '85 we had a fire onboard our ship down in the -- what we call it, the incinerator and stuff, and it was-- it happened like 2:00 in the morning. A lot of people in their bunks asleep and they sounded the alarm. Everybody just jumped up, went to their spaces and said they had a fire that was out of control down in that compartment, so I was a part of the fire fighting team. We had to dress up, don our gear and go down there and fight that fire, and it had got so hot down there where a couple of the guys had passed out. So we had to call back up to the repair lockers and get reliefs to come in there, say, like every five to ten minutes just to give them a break because it was so hot it there. And if it wasn't for everybody pulling together at time, we could have lost a big part of the ship and could have lost a couple lives as well.

My adrenaline was going through my veins, blood pumping and stuff. I just wanted to get this fire over with so we can go and assess the damage. I didn't want to sink out there, so I just made sure -- we just wanted to make sure that fire was out.

WORK SKILLS: Working with technology -- Learning to work with computers

I really got involved in computers when we first commissioned the U.S.S. Chief down here and that's when they said all this old, ancient material that they had back in the '70s was going out and being replaced by all these computer systems. And I had no idea, no background knowledge of computers beside what we learned in A School, which was the basics, and when I got to my first ship, that's when they brought onboard the -- back then we had IBM 486 computer, and each command-- I mean, each office code inside that ship received a computer and they say we had to take all-- take all the message traffic from computers. Well, we call in, do a download or gate-- a phone download with their COM center, process everything on the computer, take that information off the computer, download it to diskettes, and then we had to teach everyone in our command on how they use the computers or read their message traffic. And computers played a big part in it because they incorporated all the patch panels that-- removed all the patch panels and made that computerized and everything. It was electronics patch panels now. We had to sit down at a computer, figure out, okay, what's a DTE? What's a DTC? At a terminal. . . Data Communication set and data terminal set and so. I mean, it was . . . a big change process going on there and then trying to find a lot of schools to go to help me understand all the stuff they was incorporating. And without the school that the Navy had at the time and stuff, I would have been lost.

It was manual patch panels. You just plug in material-- I mean, patches to hook up one signal to another signal-- a signal to your equipment. Now that they did away with all of that, we went from computers where we had to electronically do everything. So it was an interesting transformation there.

I learned that in our-- they call it Information System Technician School right now, but it was basically Radiomen C7 School where we learned-- start learning most of the information. And a lot of it I did on-the-job training by watching other people, which paid big dividends later on because I used to have this one Chief here go around start setting up circuits on a computer and I was curious about it. I asked him, you know, could you show me what you're doing and stuff so I can learn it as well? And he was more than helpful. He sat down there, explained it to me how things work on a computer, what to look for if you start running into problems and everything, computer gives you certain error codes where you had to go look up in the book and find out what those error codes were so you can go back in there and troubleshoot.

JOB/CAREER: Job overview

My name is Henry Earl Lewis. I'm an information systems technician. I'm currently stationed at Mine Warfare Training Center, Ingleside, Texas.

Information systems technicians are formerly radiomen. What we do is work on a command's LAN system. [LAN stands for Local Area Network and refers to the communications system within a given location.] Deals with downloading message traffic from a secure gate guard and putting them on the LAN system so everyone in the command can view them.

I'm working with radio systems, communication systems, give the command electronic e-mail capabilities where they can go out through the command and talk to everyone or send messages to each and everyone on the command without having to physically call them up on the phone or go by their offices.

We set up access to e-mail, Internet accounts. We also do training for them. We're at a training facility so we provide them with LAN (Local Area Network) capability where they can access information through other command-- training commands and it will be ready available for the students. And we go around troubleshooting ADP problems that people in the command have. ADP. Automated Data Processing. And whenever someone in the command has a computer problem, were it printers, software devices inside a computer, or hardware or printers, internal drives or whatever, we'll go around troubleshoot them, fix them, and get them back online as soon as possible.

JOB/CAREER: Career Path in the Navy

I was stationed-- well, I moved down here in April 1998. I was recently onboard the U.S.S. Chief stationed down here in Ingleside, Texas, and been dealing with computers for the last six years and it's been a rewarding challenge for me.

I was born in Jackson, Louisiana, and I decided in high school that I wanted something challenging. I really wanted to go see the world, so I figured the Navy would be a good opportunity for me to go out and learn a job trade and get a chance to see the world at the same time. So I talked with one of my uncles. He was the only one that joined the Navy and I decided to follow in his footsteps and I joined the Navy in 1981, was-- went to Boot Camp in San Diego, California, which was a challenging two months. Everybody says it's like summer camp, but I think they're different. And once I finished up Boot Camp in San Diego, I went to Radioman A School in San Diego, California, which was a self-paced course and I found it really challenging. I got into the radioman work rate because I figured I was going to be a DJ or something, but come to find out once I went to A School, it was a totally different story there.

First of all, they told me I had to learn how to type. I said, well, I didn't think DJs typed. I thought they'd be on the airways and stuff. So I went through the typing course and everything. Passed it with flying colors. And they said I'll be working with computers. And it was an old, ancient-model computer that they currently had. We used to name it Fred because every time we'd go in there and take tests, typing tests, Fred would go down. Fred was the computer, so on our final day of testing, we had to qualify a certain many words per minute. Go in there to type on the computer and stuff and all of a sudden Fred goes down. And so they say it'll probably be about two or three hours before it come back up. A couple of friends of mine, we left and went over to a florist, came back, bought Fred some flowers. And the instructor said, "why you do that?" Say, well, I think Fred is dead, so we go ahead and give him some flowers. They thought it was hilarious. It came back up about two and half hours later, I was able to finish my typing test and I felt pretty good about it.

[If I could give advice to high school students,] I'd say, stay in school, listen to your teachers because they are your best friends at the time. If you can, get in all the calculus, physics. Learn all you can about computers because they are-- they are important part of our lives right now and the I think they are the wave of the future so learn all you can while you're in high school. Stay in school and be all that you can be while you're in school. You know. Make your parents proud of you.

My current goal is to go ahead and retire in the Navy, do my 20 years. I only have another year left. If I was to pick up E7, make another advancement, you know, I would like to stay on, go to another ship, you know, because I feel that I could make a difference to some of the junior sailors out there. I want to mold them into a great sailor as well, but I have no regrets. I enjoyed the Navy for the last 19 years. I'd like to get out in my 20 if I do not pick up Chief, and I'd like to move on in something, into a communication field working with IBM, AT&T, what have you. And also I'd like to finish my college career. Currently have Associates Degree and I'd like to move on and get my Bachelors, and my children are my light and I'd just like to see them grow up and graduate and prosper in life as well.

JOB/CAREER: Life on a ship

[The ship I'm on is one of] the smallest ships that we have in the Navy, and we're in cramped quarters where my berth area, we hold six personnel down there. It's about big as a normal person's bathroom. You sleep in coffin racks and so just about six, six and a half feet by four feet wide and everything. And it's interesting, you know, down in that compartment only two people can be there at one time changing clothes or whatever. And the chow line. I mean, they serve enough food-- they make enough food to feed a crew of 85, but it's like everywhere you go, you got to wait in line and stuff. I mean, it's interesting though, but you have a lot of camaraderie on there, though, being so close to each other and that six-month deployment, I think a lot of people on there, you know, connected. We had a lot of unity onboard that ship being such a small crew and we were away from home. Everybody helped each other try-- you know, try to get through the rough times. You know, a couple of guys never been away from their families before, so we had like group sessions onboard just to talk about, you know, the separation and we tried to do different things just to get our minds off the separation, you know, like do command sports. You know, have we call it Family Night; one night where everybody sit around, oh, and go card games or wherever they wanted to do. We do little skits, you know, like dress up for Halloween or whatever, you know. You know, do videotaping of that and send it back to the families and stuff. I think during the whole six-month deployment, what really brought everybody together was when he told us we could do a video teleconferencing. That's to do a videotape and, you know, say hi to the family members, let them know how we are doing and they send it back to the States. Let them see it and then they videotape our families and sent it over there to us. So that helped build morale up a lot, too. And the command sponsored a lot of activities, softball game, basketball tournaments and stuff. That helped a lot -- a whole lot.

In all my endeavors, you know, I always had a support team there. Our command has a support team. If you're having any problem whatsoever, there's someone inside the command you can go to and talk to or they'll give you resource of where you can reach out and help you in any means that's necessary. I found a lot of -- I mean, I enjoyed the Navy. I met a lot of great people from all over the world in the Navy and stuff and without the Navy, I don't think I would have met half of the people that I did. It's a lot of camaraderie here, so I enjoyed it.

JOB/CAREER: Importance of lifelong learning

My mother always taught us those values and to keep God in your life and then anything goes wrong, always thank God or pray to God, you know, to help me get through this. And my wife, she's there to help me out a lot. And being that I have two kids, ages 10 and 11, I wanted to be a good role model for them so whenever they come home with their problems, I sit there, talk to them about it, and try to help them the best I can. And now that stuff that they're learning in school now, I really need to stay up to speed with it because they come home and ask me questions about it. So I want to be there for them, but I also don't want to look dumb in front of them, try to, you know, stay up there with them and stuff so I can help them out.

Well, you have to have good communication skills, oral, a good oral and/or written command of the English language. Writing skills are very important as well. And it's something inside. You've just got to have that drive, just want to excel, keep excelling because in this day and age, everything is changing rapidly and stuff, so you have to have resources out there where you can go back. You know, teachers. Then and there is a helpful is you can go out there and check new information out as it comes along.

JOB/CAREER: Biggest challenge

The biggest challenge is leaving my family behind when we're getting underway. I talk with them before we get ready to make deployments. The longest I've ever been away from them is six months. And we sit down, make sure we are -- I tell my kids how long I'm going to be gone, where I'm going to be going to, the reason why we have to make this deployment, and keeping them informed and just the separation away from them is a big challenge for me ... while my children was growing up, this was my first time ever being apart from them so long, and I always be there to help them out whenever they need me, and that was -- I think that was a big challenge for me there-- I mean, for all of us really is that dealing with the separation we have to go through. But they -- once you talk to them, let them know what's going on, how long you're doing it and why you're doing it as part of your job, and made them see the big picture, it was a big help. And now that we have the Internet, we can coordinate back and forth through e-mail and that helps get me through the hard times sometimes.