

(U) An Interview with Zelda

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(U) With the first anniversary of the "Ask Zelda" column looming on the horizon (in June), we decided to interview Zelda herself. We thought her readers might be interested in learning more about the advice-giver...

(U) SIDtoday: Zelda, your advice column "Ask Zelda" has been the most successful non-technical series in the history of SIDtoday. A lot of people have questioned whether Zelda is a real person or a team of people, and why she uses a pen name.

(U) Zelda: Well, as you can see, I'm a real person. In the first issue you published my "credentials," and that description was accurate; but the picture that runs with the column [*above*] looks nothing like me. As for Zelda being a team of people, I do occasionally consult with another person for a "sanity check," but I am the sole author of the column.

(U) The decision to use a pen name came about for several reasons. The idea for the column was proposed by the *SIDtoday* editor, who was looking for a venue where SID supervisors could write in to ask advice. Since *SIDtoday* is like an online newspaper, we decided to follow the tradition of newspaper write-in advice columnists (such as Dear Abby and Miss Manners) and give me a nom de plume. I like it because using a pen name creates a persona who's more memorable and accessible than "Ask Mary Smith, Chief of S456." Plus it creates a certain mystique about Zelda... she's bigger than life. It also prevents me from getting inundated with hate mail and requests for advice outside of the column. [*Ed. note: Some people have asked for Zelda's direct help with a personal problem but didn't want it published in SIDtoday.*]

(U) ST: You said it was an advice column for supervisors...

(U) Z: Yes -- that was the original plan. But non-supervisory employees began writing in asking questions and requesting someone like Zelda help them with their issues, too.

(U) ST: So you branched out to answer anything work related?

(U) Z: [laughs] More or less! I don't give technical or romantic advice, however.

(U) ST: What has been the reaction to Zelda?

(U) Z: I'm very pleased-- and surprised -- that it has been overwhelmingly positive. Each month it is among the top 5 most widely read articles, and I want to thank my loyal followers for that. I'm thinking of making little rubber bracelets that say WWZD ("What Would Zelda Do?") to give out at Front Line Leader classes. Or maybe t-shirts that say "Be a FOZ" ("Friend of Zelda").

(U) ST: But it hasn't all been positive...

(U//FOUO) Z: Heavens, no. There have been a few people who didn't appreciate Zelda's sense of humor, and at first some of the other NSA organizations (like HR and ADCL) were uncomfortable with

an unknown person in SID dispensing advice in their areas of expertise. But we made it clear that this was just Zelda's opinion and not an official answer. Strict policy questions can and should be addressed by these other organizations, but Zelda fills a void for people who are seeking advice. She acts as a wise friend or senior co-worker -- which isn't the same thing as asking for a policy interpretation. And many areas of interpersonal relations can't be addressed by policy. I don't believe there's a policy on how to deal with an obnoxious or smelly coworker, for example. Besides, I think people would rather read something with a bit of a personality (Zelda has been called "cheeky" -- even opinionated) as opposed to a bland, whitewashed party line that reads like a policy manual and has been approved by a chain of managers to scrub it of anything that might offend. Zelda is not afraid to offend -- although that's not her intent.

(U) ST: Some readers are probably wondering if the questions are really sent in by your readers, or if you make them up.

(U) Z: They were all from readers except for the very first one -- I had to "prime the pump" since no one knew about Zelda to ask questions before the first article came out. Also, in December I turned the tables on the workforce and asked them to give advice on a situation of my choosing.

(U) ST: How do you decide which questions to answer?

(U) Z: I try to address a variety of topics, so if you write in about a specific problem and I just answered a similar question, yours probably won't get published.... at least not for a while. Also, some questions are more appropriate for the policy expert in that area to answer. In that case, SIDtoday forwards the question (with the asker's permission) to that POC.

(U) ST: What issues do you see people concerned about most?

(U) Z: How to deal with their supervisor is a big one. I devoted a whole article to "managing up" because several readers had asked similar questions along those lines.

(U) ST: Is there an underlying theme or philosophy that ties all your advice together?

(U) Z: Hmmm, if I had to pick something, I might say "common sense." Also, be nice to people and assume noble intent.

(U) ST: What one piece of advice do you have for SID managers?

(U) Z: Throughout my career I've seen too many micro-managers. It's probably inevitable -- we hire people for their technical skills, and then when they get to a certain level they find they need to go into management to keep getting promoted. However, they still have a secret hankering to do the technical work. Managers need to be open minded: just because the organization has always done something a certain way doesn't mean it's the only -- or even best -- way to do it. My advice to SID managers is to **take care of your people and let your people take care of the mission.**

(U) ST: One last question: will the readers ever find out who Zelda really is?

(U) Z: I don't know... Probably when the column wraps-up, whenever that may be. Doing it too soon might be disappointing -- like unmasking the Lone Ranger!