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# The IT Crowd: Are We Stereotypes?



Ángel García-Crespo, Ricardo Colomo-Palacios, and Juan Miguel-Gómez

*Universidad de Carlos III de Madrid*

Edmundo Tovar-Caro

*Universidad Politécnica de Madrid*

**An empirical study about the way in which today's media—particularly television—portrays IT workers reflects the common perception of the profession.**

In recent years, the IT field has expanded beyond traditional stove-pipe organizational systems to infiltrate companies and homes alike. Accordingly, the current identity associated with the IT profession is a combination of several personality traits. Unfortunately, this fragmentation has led to stereotypes that aren't particularly positive.

Professional stereotypes are a common feature in how society views different jobs. Typi-

cally, movies and television play the major role in defining stereotypes, from gender and race to religion and profession. Several researchers have addressed<sup>1-5</sup> the IT profession's most common characteristics as depicted in popular films and shows—the image that emerges is someone who's nerdy, intelligent, and skilled in mathematics and programming but lacks social graces,<sup>1</sup> works long hours, and tends to be boring,<sup>5</sup> solitary,<sup>2</sup> unethical,<sup>3</sup> and poorly dressed.<sup>4</sup>

However, the literature has also identified the importance of a labor force in the IT area that adopts an ethics codes<sup>6</sup> and has good team work<sup>7-9</sup> and social skills.

We can take two conclusions from these studies: on one hand, these stereotypes about the profession are generally negative, yet they're separate from the employees' working life. Although this last point might not seem detrimental, it fundamentally affects recruitment and retention efforts for IT professionals, who have one of the highest employee turnover rates. Moreover, a recent Gartner Group study<sup>10</sup> linked the lack of available talent to slow overall growth in the IT sector; thus, examining the diffusion of such stereotypes could show us a way to fight them and attract new people to the IT profession. In this article, we present the results of an empirical study about the way in which IT workers are portrayed in the media, particularly television, and consequently, the perception of the profession that future IT professionals could end up reflecting.

### Our Methodology

Because television significantly contributes to the formation of public opinion in today's society, we conducted an experiment about stereotypes portrayed in the British TV series *The IT Crowd*, which focuses on the small, basement-dwelling IT support team of Reynholm Industries, a fictitious corporation located in central London. Our initial efforts centered on the first two episodes of the series: "Yesterday's Jam" and "Calamity Jen," written by Graham Linehan and produced by Ash Atalla.

We conducted our study in Madrid (Spain), with a sample of 40 subjects, half of whom were IT professionals and half of whom were students in their final year of high school, with a total of 22 men and 18 women. The average IT professional's age was 30.6 years, and the student's was 17.8. After the subjects viewed both episodes, we asked them to fill out a two-question survey: the first asked for eight adjectives describing the two main male characters, and the second question depended on the subjects themselves. Specifically, using a Likert scale ranging from one to four, we asked the IT professionals to rate whether they identified with the characters and the students to rate whether they found the characters' IT roles attractive.

**Table 1. Adjective frequencies.**

Adjective	Frequency
Geek	32
Dirty	28
Arrogant	27
Nerd	25
Freak	21
Tacky	21
Unfriendly	17
Socially inept	17
Neglected	13
Lazy	13
Shy	12
Intelligent	12
Ugly	12
Innocent	10
Nervous	9
Idiot	9
Know it all	8
Casual dresser	8
Introverted	8
Isolated	7
Capable	6
Highly gifted	3
Negligent	2

**Table 2. Groups of adjectives and their connotations.**

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Personality traits	6.56%	87.19%	2.50%
Physical traits	0	3.75%	0

### Results

A definite pattern emerged from the 23 adjectives; Table 1 lists them along with their frequency of selection in the survey.

To empirically analyze the adjective classifications, we built a taxonomy of two distinct groups: adjectives that denote personality traits versus physical traits. To establish the adjectives' numerical weight, we made a second classification relative to their values and associated connotations (positive, negative, or neutral).

As Table 2 illustrates, we can see a greater tendency to specify adjectives related to personality traits (which represent 96.25 percent of the descriptions) rather than physical descriptions

**Table 3. Level of identification IT professionals felt with characters on *The IT Crowd*.**

Likert scale	Number of women	Number of men
1 (lowest)	8	4
2	1	6
3	0	1
4 (highest)	0	0

**Table 4. IT profession’s attractiveness to students, based on watching *The IT Crowd*.**

Likert scale	Number of women	Number of men
1 (lowest)	9	7
2	0	4
3	0	0
4 (highest)	0	0

(which account for only 3.75 percent). We can also see that 90.92 percent of the connotations are negative, with only 6.56 percent positive and 2.5 percent neutral. Overall, these results indicate that our subjects didn’t view the profession in a positive light.

### Digging Deeper

Next, we put two different questions before our sample populations. We asked the 20 IT professionals to indicate whether they felt that the TV characters reflected their own personality traits, based on a Likert scale from one to four, with one being the least amount of identification. Sixty percent of them responded that they felt zero identification with the TV characters. Yet, among those who recognized themselves in the show, women averaged a lower level of identification than the men.

The question we posed to the students aimed to determine whether they considered IT work attractive, based on what they’d seen in the show, on a Likert scale of one to four (one being least attractive). Table 4 summarizes the results.

The subjects’ answers indicated that 80 percent of them exhibited a very low level of interest in the profession. Only four subjects considered the work slightly interesting based on the show, and

all of these were men. None of the subjects considered the IT profession to be very interesting.

### Discussion

Although not necessarily a definitive result, our small survey of subjects watching two episodes of an IT-focused television show revealed an overall negative image of the profession—even from the people currently working in it! Most of the adjectives our subjects used to describe the central characters were negative, complementing the conclusions of a separate study conducted on a sample of movies.<sup>11</sup> This study also found a proliferation of negative characteristics (both personality and physical) in IT professionals, although it noted that in accordance with the generalization of IT in society, the number of IT professionals in leading roles was systematically increasing. This circumstance helps “normalize” the more common characteristics in real-life IT professionals.

In our work, we found that negative descriptions correspond much more closely to professional stereotypes than to the real competencies associated with IT work. Taking description meanings into account, we classified the descriptions in our study according to typical IT professional stereotypes: “lack of social skills” (socially inept, isolated, introverted, unfriendly, shy), “smart” (intelligent, know it all, capable, highly gifted), “nerdy/geeky” (Geek, nerd, freak), and “badly dressed” (casual dresser, tacky). Unfortunately, we discovered that our findings were closer to negative professional stereotypes than to IT professional competence.

Based on how the IT professionals were portrayed by the characters on the TV show and in real IT work, the level of identification with the IT professionals in our study was unsurprisingly low. We found the level of empathy was lower for women, perhaps because the two lead characters were men.

The answers by the students in our study suggest that negative media representations are unlikely to aid in attracting future IT workers to the profession—a problematic situation given the shortage of workers currently affecting the IT sector. From the viewpoint of attracting new professionals to the field and students to IT degrees in academic institutions, it would help considerably to eliminate the stereotypes described

here. One suggestion is to encourage collaboration between organizations and academic institutions in attracting new people to IT roles and for professional associations to assume a much more active role in communicating IT working styles appropriately.

IT professionals are often subject to negative social stigmas. It seems that the IT community hasn't adequately conveyed its workers' positive professional characteristics to the public. The increasingly broad presence of IT workers in the business world will certainly change social stereotypes about the professionals working in this sector, but so far, popular media isn't providing attractive competency descriptions. It's more likely that an increasingly mature and dominant presence of IT workers in everyday life will help define the true characteristics and professional circumstances of IT workers. Our work revealed two different findings: the negative stereotypes present in TV characters and the lack of identification and attractiveness of these roles for both IT professionals and students. In this context, our recommendations are to make the media aware that it should present IT professionals in a better light and to encourage professionals to change negative stereotypes by communicating their job activities in a positive and attractive way. ■

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*Ángel García-Crespo* is a professor in the computer science department at the Universidad de Carlos III de Madrid. His research interests include software engineering, education, information systems, and the Semantic Web. Contact him at [angel.garcia@uc3m.es](mailto:angel.garcia@uc3m.es).

*Ricardo Colomo-Palacios* is a senior lecturer in the computer science department at the Universidad de Carlos III de Madrid. His research interests include software process improvement, software project management, information systems, and IT business. Contact him at [ricardo.colomo@uc3m.es](mailto:ricardo.colomo@uc3m.es).

*Juan Miguel Gómez-Berbís* is a senior lecturer in the computer science department at the Universidad de Carlos III de Madrid. His research interests include Semantic Web services, business process modeling, business-to-business integration, and bioinformatics. Contact him at [juanmiguel.gomez@uc3m.es](mailto:juanmiguel.gomez@uc3m.es).

*Edmundo Tovar-Caro* is a professor in the computer science department at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. His research interests include software engineering and education. Contact him at [etovar@fi.upm.es](mailto:etovar@fi.upm.es).