July 13th 2019 is [Embrace Your Geekness Day](#). The sponsors have put this day forward on the grounds that we should all be proud of what defines us. They add that nothing defines us quite so much as the things that we are passionate about. Geeks, they suggest, are simply people who are "completely obsessed with one or more subjects", and can talk about them for hours.

## Understanding geeks

But is this really what we all mean by 'geek'? A quick glance at a few dictionaries suggests that maybe this definition does not quite catch all the nuances of popular culture. The basic [Cambridge Dictionary](#) definition agrees that geeks know a lot about a particular subject, and also suggests that geeks are intelligent, but not popular or fashionable. However, Cambridge also offers a couple of other takes on geekiness, and both suggest that the word is linked to knowledge of computers or technology. This is probably the more familiar usage for most of us.

In a slightly more tongue-in-cheek way, Urban Dictionary defines geeks as "the people you pick on in high school and wind up working for as an adult". More seriously, it suggests that geeks are interested in something to an extreme level. It doesn't really matter what: the crucial information is the extreme level of interest and/or knowledge.

No discussion of geeks would be complete without touching on social awkwardness. There is definitely something about geeks that has an element of being a bit different in social terms. Both the Cambridge definition and Urban Dictionary allude to this, and other websites are more brutal. There is, however, nothing intrinsically awkward about knowing a lot about a subject, or sharing that knowledge with others.

However, 'geeky' is certainly not a compliment. For example, an [employee review of a well-known consulting group](#) describes it as "a bit too geeky for me". There's no doubt about the location of the problem there. At best, the word is used in a self-deprecating way to explain away care and attention on a particular subject: "*I'm such a geek!*"

## What is it about knowledge?

Perhaps it is simply that we find deep knowledge about anything slightly threatening. You can see this in the way people behave around doctors, and indeed, how doctors themselves behave. How else can you explain how they get away with calling patients by their first names, while introducing themselves as 'Dr Smith'? You could also see it in the way that politicians in the UK dismissed 'expert opinions' about the likely fallout from Brexit.

Acquiring deep knowledge about anything takes work. It doesn't matter whether this work is a matter of professional requirements, or simply development of an interest, we all know that it takes time and effort. You do not become a doctor overnight. However, neither do you become an expert in economics, or on a particular software or programming language, or indeed the Star Wars movies, without hard work.

Maybe the real question, then, is why do we sometimes respect and celebrate that work, and sometimes dismiss it as 'geeky'?

It could be that we find deep knowledge particularly problematic in two cases. The first is when it is pursued to the exclusion of everything else, and every other interest. We admire historical figures like Leonardo da Vinci for their breadth of interests and knowledge, even as we recognise that the world no longer works quite like that. The second case is when someone knows a lot about a subject that most of us find either extremely challenging or just not very interesting: particle physics, for example, or even technology.

## Knowledge, thought leadership and diversity

Does this really matter? It certainly does for thought leadership.

If deep knowledge is threatening, how can thought leaders develop relationships and come to influence their audience? Hiding their knowledge does not seem helpful. This is why it is so good to see campaigns like 'Embrace Your Geekness Day', and the Geek Girl Meetup. These suggest that there is growing recognition that knowledge matters, and that diversity is about more than just gender or race.

However, thought leaders must also think carefully about how they present themselves. Nobody likes to be patronised, or to be overwhelmed with technical knowledge. The key is to use empathy to understand your audience's position, and then apply your deep knowledge to help your customers to solve their problems. That's thought leadership, twinned with inner geekiness.