# My Mentor: The Internet

by Danny R. Faught

ONE OF THE BIGGEST SURPRISES AND honors I have received in my career was when Edward Miller invited me to serve on the advisory board for the Quality Week conference. I was 26 years old at the time and had a hard time believing that the offer was sincere. I asked why he felt I was worthy to stand alongside some of the most respected testing experts in the world—surely he knew how green I was. Dr. Miller replied that he liked my writings on the Internet, which at the time were mostly confined to postings on comp.software.testing and the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for the group.

I was dumbfounded that my musings could have led to such a step up in my career. And then similar offers followed, perhaps based on the fact that I had "Quality Week Advisory Board" on my resume, or perhaps because of my continued participation in discussions on the Internet. This experience eventually led me to my current role as an independent consultant.

So my participation on the Internet is really the foundation of my career. That's a pretty powerful mentor.

Many people don't have the luxury of access to a mentor who can provide guidance and can track down an answer to any question. So in addition to your existing support structure, you too may be able to find help on the Internet.

## Joining the Discussion

I remember when the testing newsgroup (comp.software.testing) first appeared on Usenet. Eventually I started to recognize the names of some of the regular contributors, and I became a regular contributor as well. I learned a lot about testing from comp.software.testing. I ended up writing the



**Danny Faught's career took off when he began participating on the Internet.**

### Info to Go

- Join online forums, discussions, and roundtables.
- Cultivate relationships with experts that you meet online.
- You may be surprised where the Internet can take you.

FAQ list for the newsgroup because no one else had volunteered to do it.

Usenet no longer dominates the space of online discussions. Several years ago, a coworker put me in touch with Mark Wiley, a friend of his who was doing work similar to mine at another company. We started swapping email, adding other people to the discussion along the way. It wasn't long before I had set up an electronic mailing list to make it easier for us all to communicate. The list is named "swtest-discuss" (http://topica.com/lists/swtest-discuss/), and it has grown to include hundreds of subscribers from all over the world. There are many other lists available (including http://groups.yahoo.com/group/software-testing/), some covering testing in general and others covering narrow topics such as specific test tools.

You'll also find several Web-based forums where you can swap ideas about testing. The ones that I've used are QAForums.com and StickyMinds.com. I also frequent Jerry Weinberg's SHAPE Forum (www.geraldmweinberg.com/shape.html), where I get some very useful advice about management and effectively influencing the people I work with (an annual fee is required for this one).

### Free Consulting?

I cultivated special relationships with a few of the people I met online. I relied on them as mentors, though I didn't use that term with them, and we didn't have a formal agreement to stay in touch on any particular schedule. If one of them had particular wisdom about my current concerns, I'd contact that person more frequently than the others. For more general questions, I'd rotate the people that I asked, so as not to stretch any one relationship too far.

Because most of my mentors were

consultants, I remember thinking that I had found a great way to get free consulting. Now that I'm starting to help other people in a similar way, I realize that I'm paying for all those favors now, which I'm glad to do. The makeup of my informal team of mentors has changed over time, but I still have a few special people on tap when I need them.

To find an email mentor, first participate in online discussions and pay attention to who has knowledge that's relevant to your needs. This may be the author of a book or an article that you've read, but don't write off the average Jane (or Joe) as a potential mentor. There are many battle-worn testers out there whose names aren't household words. Of course, if you find someone local via a professional organization, so much the better.

Before you start asking for a significant amount of time from potential mentors, make sure they know you via your online discussions. When a particular subject comes up that interests you, and you have a good reason to take the discussion offline with your potential mentors, send them a private email asking for more information about the subject at hand. If they actively engage you in the conversation, you may be able to cultivate them as mentors.

Whether you use the word "mentor" or not, ask if they mind if you occasionally ask them for help. If they respond positively, continue to bounce questions their way as the need strikes you, and gauge their responsiveness each time. Don't ask new questions more than once or twice a month unless they give you permission to lean on them more heavily. And if they start giving you less guidance than you need for several queries in a row, or if they don't respond as quickly as you need them to, that's your sign that you need to engage someone else as a mentor instead.

## Help from Dead Trees

A senior tester once told me that there just weren't many books about testing available. There are actually dozens and dozens of testing books out there, with more coming out all the time, but you usually have to special-order them. The StickyMinds.com Books Guide is a great source of information about the testing books that are available.

There are also several print and electronic publications, but they're hard to find if you don't know where to look for them. If you're reading *Better Software*, you've already found a good one. There are some commercial newsletters that you can get for free. Their main purpose is to promote the businesses that create them, but some provide useful information nonetheless. Software Research, Inc. has published a nice one for several years (Quality Techniques Newsletter—http://soft.com/News/QTN-Online/), and I publish a newsletter myself. Also, organizations often have publications for their members.

There are a few online clearinghouses for articles about testing. My favorite is StickyMinds.com. Many of the articles

## MARK YOUR CALENDAR

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**Conference on COTS-Based Software Systems**
Crowne Plaza Redondo Beach and Marina
Redondo Beach, California
FOR INFORMATION: www.iccbss.org
PHONE: 1 213 740 5703
FAX: 1 213 740 4927
EMAIL: ladonna@sunset.usc.edu

**March 8–11, 2004**
**Software Engineering Process Group (SEPG) 2004**
Orlando World Center Marriott
Orlando, Florida
FOR INFORMATION: www.sei.cmu.edu/sepg/
PHONE: 1 412 268 5800
FAX: 1 330 963 0319
EMAIL: customer-relations@sei.cmu.edu

**March 15–19, 2004**
**Software Development Conference and Expo**
Santa Clara Convention Center
Santa Clara, California
FOR INFORMATION: www.sdexpo.com
PHONE: 1 415 947 6130 or 1 800 441 8826
FAX: 1 415 947 6020
EMAIL: rrobles@cmp.com

**April 13–16, 2004**
**Gartner's CIO Boot Camp**
Tarrytown, NY
FOR INFORMATION: www.gartner.com/2_events/conferences/asset_55723_675.jsp
PHONE: 1 203 316 6630
EMAIL: ExpEvents@gartner.com

**April 21–23, 2004**
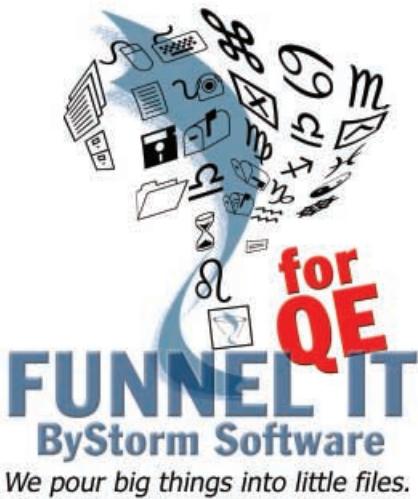**International Conference on Software Testing**
Congress Center Stadthalle
Düsseldorf, Germany
FOR INFORMATION: www.icstest.com/int/
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EMAIL: info@icstest.com

**May 17–21, 2004**
**STAR*EAST* 2004**
Rosen Centre Hotel
Orlando, Florida
FOR INFORMATION: www.sqe.com/stareast
PHONE: 1 888 268 8770
FAX: 1 904 278 4380
EMAIL: sqeinfo@sqe.com

## Career Development

are free, and for an extra fee, you can access a searchable archive of past *Better Software* and *STQE* issues and conference proceedings, plus a few online books.

Don't stop at reading the books and articles. The authors of these resources are usually easily accessible via email. Surely there's some nagging question you have about their work—go ahead and ask them! If you're polite, you can usually get a helpful response.

### Face-time

What does the Internet have to do with face-to-face meetings? That's how you find them. You can't beat the richness of face-to-face interactions with someone who has something to teach you. Learn about conferences from the comp.software.testing FAQ (http://www.crim.ca/ctl/cst.FAQ.html) or the Cigital SQM Hotlist (http://www.cigitallabs.com/resources/hotlist/). Look up professional organizations that might have meetings in your area—the comp.software.testing FAQ has a partial list. Also, browse the training courses listed on testingfaqs.org.

### Finding More

There are many websites that serve as portals to the vast amounts of online information about software testing. Many of them aren't very well maintained, so try more than one when you're searching for information. Start with the comp.software.testing FAQ, which lists Web portals in the "World Wide Web resources" section.

Here's a search tip—when you've done enough research that you know two or three of the things you're looking for, do a Web search for all of them within a single query, and you'll probably find lists showing several similar resources. For example, you can go to a search engine and enter all three of these book titles, including the quotes: "testing computer software," "the art of software testing," and "the craft of software testing." You'll get several pages that list additional books about software testing. Interestingly enough, a simple search for "software testing books" also works but shows a different list of pages.

Nowadays there is a wealth of information about software testing on the Web. Your challenge is to sift through it to find what's useful. I hope this article helps point you in the right direction. Happy hunting! I wish you luck. **{end}**

*Danny R. Faught is a software-testing consultant. He plans to publish a resource guide for testers, as soon as enough people bug him to finish it. You can reach him at www.tejasconsulting.com or faught@tejasconsulting.com.*

**Sticky Notes**

**For more on the following topics go to www.stickyminds.com/bettersoftware**

■ Links to software-testing websites