

►► QUICK LOOK

- How a personal network can boost your career options
- Striking a balance between personal and electronic contact

Developing Your Professional Network

by Danny R. Faught

Chances are, you need to invest more time and resources into improving your network. Of course we're not talking about computer hardware; we're talking about your own network

of professional contacts. Your personalized collection of connections can have a major impact on your career. How well do you manage yours?

There are many rewards when you put energy into managing your network. People in your network system can help you find a new job...or you can turn the tables and recruit them. You can find a mentor, get some informal career coaching, and find emotional support. If you need to generate sales leads, you can use your network for that too (as long as you mind your manners). You can find vendors and service providers, or get referrals to them. You can find business partners. The possibilities are endless, so stay open to them—and don't try to pigeonhole the people in your network. If you're trying to recruit someone, it may turn out in the long run that they recruit *you* instead. A sales lead may become a supplier. Don't close the door on any of the possibilities.

I didn't think much about my networking activities until someone in my network pointed out the wonderful treatise "Networking on the Network" by Phil Agre, associate professor of information studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (<http://dlis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/network.html>). While this document is targeted at graduate students, you can apply 99% of Agre's advice to your professional life right now—and probably should.

Agre's work translates well from the academic to the software world because he's talking about a research environment. As professionals, we

should *always* be in a research frame of mind, always learning. As citizens of our fields of endeavor, we should be interacting with our colleagues, publishing our experiences, and keeping up to date with the latest trends. These things all contribute to the kind of quality networking Agre writes about.

The Basics

Agre discusses several basic networking steps:

1. Know your goals
2. Identify some relevant people
3. Court these people individually
4. Meet each person face-to-face
5. Exchange drafts of your writing
6. Follow up

Setting *goals* is crucial, because it determines how you prioritize your networking energies. Where do you want to go? What do you want other people's help in doing?

Next is the difficult task of finding "*relevant*" people—a task that will probably bring you outside your comfort zone. Let's say your area of interest is "system testing shrinkwrap applications on Windows." Agre suggests that you slice your area of interest into different combinations. In this case, you might talk to people who work with Windows shrinkwrap programs in any capacity, people who system test any type of Windows application, and people who do applica-

tion system testing under any operating system. This will broaden your perspective and improve your chances of finding the resources you need to accomplish your goals.

When you identify an individual you'd like to include in your network, Agre suggests a social ritual not unlike "*courting*" in the days of yore. This analogy makes sense, because you're interacting with an individual, not broadcasting to a large group of people—and there is an etiquette you should follow in order to present yourself in the best possible way. Your network has concentric rings; your contacts start on the outermost ring and move inward as the relationship becomes stronger. On a thread on this subject on Jerry Weinberg's SHAPE Forum, he described networking in a decidedly *National Geographic* style:

"[T]here is usually a graduated series of steps, back and forth, like the mating dance of tropical birds. Someone makes some move that might be an invitation, the other person makes some move that might be an acceptance. Then the cycle repeats, with the move being more probably an invitation, and the response being more likely an acceptance. After *N* rounds, for some value of *N*, the person is in the network—but at each step, each person's risk of rejection or losing face is quite small."

In a university environment, this courting ritual revolves around research, where you read your contact's published papers, you publish papers that cite your contact's paper, and then you share your papers with your contact, hoping for a response. This

approach also works in a professional setting (see my article “Getting Published” in the July/August 1999 issue of *STQE*). But even those of us outside the publish-or-perish environment need to start our networking. So as an alternative, I recommend finding shared professional interests with people, and then finding something useful to do with those interests. More on that in a moment.

The next step, according to Agre, is to meet the person face-to-face. He insists that this is a very important step that can’t be replaced with an email conversation. I know from experience that meeting someone who is in your network helps to solidify the relationship and brings them closer in the concentric rings of your network. When I consider those who are the core of my network, I’ve had “face time” with all of them.

Agre’s fifth step, *exchanging drafts of your writing*, may be based in the academic environment but it’s just as relevant in software engineering. He stresses that when you write papers or articles, you should share pre-publication drafts of what you write with some of the people in your network and ask them to help you make improvements. People in your network may ask you to do the same, and you should accept this opportunity whenever you can. To broaden this concept beyond the research context, I would call this step in the networking process “*Interact meaningfully.*”

Sharing draft papers bares your soul a little bit, building a more personal rapport. (As an example, I shared drafts of this article with people in *my* network: Phil Agre, Jerry Weinberg, Bret Pettichord, Carol Stollmeyer, and Penny Parkinson—all people I feel safe in sharing with and relying on.)

Other ways to have meaningful interaction could be to request some career coaching, participate in a deep discussion about your field, or ask for help with some complex technical issues. “The phrase ‘I’d like to ask your advice’ causes miracles the world over,” writes Agre.

Finally, the “*Follow up*” step is where you nurture and maintain your network relationships. “Keep coming up with simple ways to be useful to the people in your network,” writes

Agre. “[Networking] produces bonds of reciprocal obligation through the exchange of favors.” Make yourself useful, and your network will continue to be useful for you.

Electronic Media

Agre’s paper also addresses the relationship between connecting people and using electronic media—including some common mistakes that people make when using email. Many of these ring true for me; I’ve often dug myself deep into a pit of miscommunication during an email discussion. Over time, I have learned to pick up the telephone as soon I suspect that either party is having trouble getting the point across. Keep in mind that for most people, the potential pitfalls are not intuitively obvious, and we would all do well to read a primer on online etiquette (such as that provided by Agre, or the additional resources listed in this article’s Sticky-Notes section).

There are several key ways you can use electronic media to make the basic steps of networking more effective for you. First, make sure you have a Web site representing your public persona, including the complete text of all of your relevant papers, contact information, etc. Networking is a *public* activity, and having a Web site helps a great deal in supporting your public persona. Agre warns against putting personal details on your professional Web page, advising that you have a separate personal Web page.

I recommend even more careful thought about what you do online. You can’t completely partition parts of your online life—everything you do online could be accessible to everyone. Always assume that your boss, a potential employer, or a potential customer will find everything on the net that can be traced to your name.

Of course, the Internet is a good place to find new people to add to your network; a large percentage of my network consists of people I first met over the Internet. But it’s not nearly as simple as broadcasting a message looking for people with similar interests. I find most of my contacts by doing things that give me exposure to new people, but I let the networking opportunities happen serendipitously. This takes the

pressure off, and gets better results than aggressively pursuing people. Remember that ultimately you need to deal with individuals. You can’t incorporate an entire pre-existing community all at once into your network, except perhaps at the farthest fringes.

Agre asserts again that you must meet your contact face-to-face in order to continue the courtship, even though the allure of electronic communication lulls us into thinking that molecules are obsolete. In my networking, I haven’t waited for a face-to-face meeting before I have meaningful interaction with someone. But I do think that you shouldn’t rely only on email. Agre states that in some email-intensive communities, there is very little use of the telephone. I can certainly concur; in a number of situations when I’ve tried to set up a phone call, the person on the other end of the email conversation responded as if I were a lunatic from another century. But I think that a phone call can go a long way toward furthering a relationship, especially when the face-to-face meeting must be postponed until the two of you can arrange a meeting at a conference or other event.

Can I Go Hide Behind My Computer Now?

Do you shudder at the thought of having to learn social etiquette in order to manage your professional network? Networking rituals do have to evolve to fit with new communication mechanisms. But the workings of the human psyche haven’t changed, and you still need to learn the skills that are necessary to develop a network that can bolster your career. It’s really something you can’t do without: “Useful information,” as Agre writes, “is always bound up with useful people.” Set aside some time to read “Networking on the Network” (it’s forty-two pages printed, but worth the paper), and keep your mind open to applying these concepts to your professional environment. Good luck and good networking. *STQE*

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