

Networking for Geeks

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How do you tell the difference between an extrovert programmer and an introvert programmer?

The extrovert programmer looks at *your* shoes when talking to you.

Like all the best jokes, this familiar one is funny because it has a core of truth. And, my fellow testers and others, it isn't just the programmers in our business (nor even just the introverts) who can feel less than adept socially.

Many of us are online every day on social and professional networking sites, assiduously exchanging ideas, photos, job information, and social nothings with people we know well and others we've never met face-to-face and probably never will. For us geeks, online networking is easy—but actually going out and meeting people can be much harder. Whether you're just beginning your career or an established professional contemplating going independent for the first time, you need to have a well-developed professional network, not only online but also in person.

If you find the idea of face-to-face “networking” intimidating, you might find it helpful to reframe and think instead of “building a network.” That means making real human connections that you nurture over time, rather than superficially working a room or simply swapping business cards with strangers. You build a lasting network slowly, one person at a time.

Start by thinking about what you want a network for and how you intend to use it and participate in it. A professional network is a multi-way street. You have to be prepared to help others as well as receive help. Knowing that could make a difference about whom you choose to network with. Are you looking for:

- Mutual help finding opportunities or giving recommendations?
- Interesting and/or useful exchanges of ideas and information?
- A career change?
- Something else?

Think about—and perhaps diagram or map—the network you already have. Almost everybody has some sort of network, even if they aren't accustomed to seeing it that way. Ask yourself:

- Who do I have mutually interesting conversations with about work?
- Who would I recommend for a position? Who would recommend me?
- Who would I tell about an opportunity? Who would tell me, if they knew I was looking?
- Who do I learn from? Who asks me for advice?

Consider everyone you have ever worked with, both colleagues and managers. Others who know your work or work ethic could include anyone with whom you've worked in a volunteer capacity or school or college mates. Even relatives and neighbors who don't work in the same business might know someone who does and who could be an important connection for you.

When you go out to meet people, make sure you take a good stock of business cards. If your employer hasn't provided them, make the small investment in yourself to have some made or print your own. (Some professionals carry their own business cards to identify themselves separately from their current employers and share their personal-professional email addresses and online presence.)

It's important to choose venues for the kind of networking you want to do. It's pointless going to places where you're bored or where there's little chance of meeting like-minded people. Look for presentations or conferences you're really interested in so you'll have natural sources of conversation. Big conferences can be daunting: the more unknown faces there are, the harder it is to break the ice with strangers. And people who are already acquainted tend to stick together at big conferences. Smallish gatherings are more likely to encourage exchanges among people who haven't before met. Best are experiential or interactive sessions where people can get to know a little of each other by working or playing a game together. Repeating events, like meetings of your local quality group or small conferences of enthusiasts, give you opportunities to get to know people over time and develop genuine professional relationships and friendships.

If you know in advance of specific people you want to meet, you can prepare. Look them up on the Web. There will likely be a photo, so you'll recognize them. Quite often, if you interest a speaker, she'll introduce you to others around her.

You're probably not alone if you feel socially awkward. The majority of people in our business aren't chatty extroverts by preference. (If they were, they'd be in sales.) It may make it easier for you to remember that going to a conference or listening to a speaker isn't like going to a party; it's work. As such, it's no different from the face-to-face exchanges you have in your regular work (though it may be less structured). At a professional gathering, you are bolstered by your professional competence—not undermined by any misgivings you may harbor about your social acumen.

Don't expect to carpet a place with your business cards or anticipate much benefit if you do. Be happy if you make one positive connection, and know that you'll need to take time and energy to turn that into something lasting. Pick up on something interesting the speaker says or a question a fellow session participant asks. Make it a genuine exchange. Show interest in and listen to what the other person has to say. But remember that you're not a failure if a connection doesn't happen immediately. Sometimes you'll need to meet people several times for productive conversations to ensue. Before then, you can follow up an initial meeting with an invitation to connect online.

Finally, be mindful that formal professional meetings aren't the only places for building your network. Be prepared wherever you go. Always carry business cards and be interested in what other people do for a living. Have an elevator speech ready—a quick

one- or two-sentence statement that says what you do and invites questions, such as “I help organizations tailor their software testing to their business risks and opportunities.”

Once you start building your network, you’ll find opportunities everywhere for extending it. On a plane or train, in a taxi or elevator, you never know when you might meet someone really interesting or a person who could point you to new work adventures!