

PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING FOR IT CONSULTANTS

by Christopher Lawson

Note: Although this article is especially directed at technical consultants, many of the points are relevant to consultants or employees in non-technical areas.

For those of you who consider yourself “techies,” you may be tempted to think that you have little need for professional networking. Why bother? After all, like most IT professionals, you probably pride yourself on technical *expertise*—so why waste time on other “fluff?”

In this paper, I hope to convince you to begin networking with a vengeance. Here’s what we’ll discuss:

- Why Should I Network?
- Example of Networking in Action
- Why Technical Competence is Not Good Enough
- Why You Should Publish White Papers
- The Importance of User Groups
- How to use Web Sites
- Networking Sites

So let’s get started!



WHY SHOULD I NETWORK?

While it’s possible that you can have a successful career working anonymously “behind the scenes,” I think you will be missing out on a lot of opportunities if you don’t network. Here’s why: Many opportunities—especially in the consulting world, come about via your *contacts*, rather than just technical expertise. Many opportunities are filled without ever being advertised in any way.

Here’s a surprising fact about connections and opportunities: Even *distant* connections are often helpful--contacts need not be close friends.

Keith Ferrazzi, in his bestselling book, *Never Eat Alone*, points out that about 35% of referrals come from *distant* connections. This means that you should cast your net pretty wide (or say goodbye to a huge chunk of business.) If you fail to develop a network of contacts, you are statistically lowering your opportunities.

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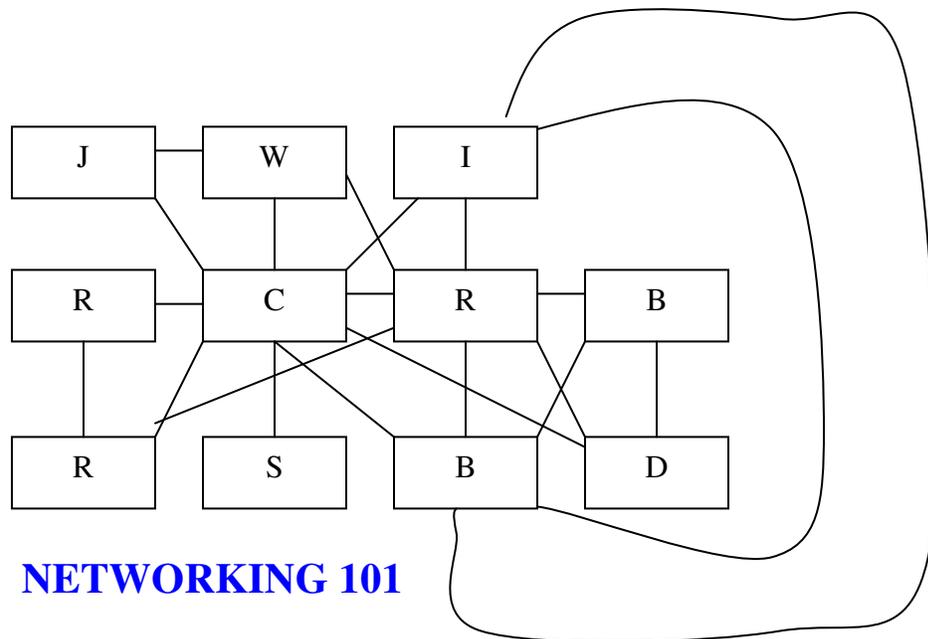


NETWORKING IN ACTION

Consider this *actual* case of networking in action:

- “Bob” presents at a local user group, and is hired by a client seated in the audience. From this connection, Bob meets quite a few other good consultants, including “Joe.”
- Bob gets phone call from Joe on behalf of a client, who soon hires Bob.
- At new client, Bob recommends two colleagues, “Sam” and “Fred,” who are also hired.
- Fred in turn knows two competent engineers, who are also hired at client.
- Bob invites yet another colleague, who is then also hired at client.
- Joe, who originally referred Bob, is himself referred by Bob to a new client.
- Bob recommends Sam to new client (where Bob had worked prior.)
- Sam is recommended by Bob to a new client he knows.

The above anecdote is true—in fact, it’s a simplification from the extra referrals that have happened in the last few days. Here’s how it all worked out (I’m using initials to help me remember all these people!)



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The real point to the story is that *everyone* was a winner—the client as well as all the consultants. The client received the services of numerous outstanding consultants, without having to interview a long list of candidates. The consultants in turn found excellent assignments with top corporations.



TECHNICAL COMPETENCE IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH

Of course, you have to be technically competent—there’s no question about that. The point is, who will *know* about your competence? Firms would love to have your expertise, but you have to make it easy for them to find you.

You must make a *strategic decision* to make connections to those in your field—decision makers as well as workers.

We have all worked with people who somehow worked themselves into a great position with marginal competence. Conversely, we’ve also witnessed very smart and capable people stuck in positions far below their abilities. What’s going on here?

There really isn’t any shortage of smart people in the world. I’ve had the privilege of working with people with advanced degrees from the world’s most famous universities. I’m sure they would have outscored me on any I.Q. test. I noticed something interesting, however. In the technical field, there wasn’t a strong correlation between career success and the college attended. I noticed that brilliant engineers were sometimes assigned independent projects with little visibility, whereas Joe Average was sometimes put in charge of the project.

There *is* a shortage however, of technically proficient professionals who make *smart career moves* that advance their careers. Allow me to suggest a few easy ways to vastly expand your network.



PUBLISH WHITE PAPERS

Most computer professionals have never published *anything*—nada. Not in a user group journal, not on someone’s web site, not anywhere. This is a terrible career mistake, especially in light of the various search engines that scour the web every day. Having your name in print adds

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credibility—it shows that you've taken the effort to research a subject (and besides-- you can actually write!) Why not take advantage of the dearth of good writing to put your own talent on display?

Journal editors at user groups are always looking for fresh writers. It's usually just as simple as writing up a good paper in WORD format, then emailing to the editor. There's no pay, of course, but that's not what you're interested in at this point.

It was via publishing white papers that I got a foothold in the publishing world, and was able to write a book on Oracle and easily find a publisher.¹ I had published several in-depth papers on the subject of high-availability systems, and published them on the web. Later, the editor at a major publishing house recognized my background in a certain subject, and asked me to review a book proposal. This in turn led him to reviewing *my* book proposal!



PARTICIPATE IN USER GROUPS

Here's another really easy way to network. Don't be fooled, however--this is extremely important (as well as fun). I am always amazed at how few IT consultants participate in user group meetings. I'm not talking about donating lots of time to attend "board" meetings. I'm just talking about joining and attending. In my field it appears that less than 5% of Oracle professionals in the local area actually attend a given meeting. Once again, why not take advantage of such a goldmine of opportunities? Besides the actual benefit of hearing top speakers in your field, you can easily network with lots of your peers. While networking, don't forget one simple step—*ask for referrals*. Don't leave this to chance.

Failure to become involved in user groups is a serious strategic blunder. The yearly cost to join most user groups is paltry—perhaps \$75 or so. For example, in the Northern California area, one important group for Oracle programmers is www.nocoug.org. This volunteer organization publishes an outstanding journal quarterly; the editor is always looking for new writers. There are similar groups around the country for almost any professional expertise. There are similar groups around the world. For example, there is a U.K Oracle Users group, found at www.ukoug.org. The Los Angeles Oracle Users Group is very active, and is found at www.laoug.org. You get the idea—no matter what your niche, there is likely a user group somewhere nearby.

CREATE YOUR OWN WEB SITE

¹ See *Writing a Book About Oracle: Art or Science?*, <http://www.writerswrite.com/journal/mar03/lawson.htm>

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These days, it is pretty easy and cheap to get a rudimentary web site going. For a very reasonable cost, you can get lots of exposure. You don't even need a lot of experience in web design. There are lots of inexpensive (or even free) authoring tools available. I used free tools to create my own web pages. You don't really have to have an extremely sophisticated web site (unless of course that's your field of expertise.)

After you write a few white papers, simply post them on your web site. Then, you can refer interested parties to this site. Also, be sure to add your new URL to your business cards.

JOIN LINKEDIN—NOW!

Here's a really easy and free step you should take *right this minute*. LinkedIn.com is the #1 professional networking site in the United States. It claims upwards of 11 million members, and many of these members are IT professionals. Recently, linkedin began allowing members to upload photos, spawning numerous discussions as to whether photos are helpful to networking. (I can't imagine how it can hurt, so I quickly uploaded mine.)

LinkedIn is free to join (and they don't even spam you!) Why in the world would you choose to *not* connect to other professionals?

There are a variety of papers with good tips on using linkedin. For example, Ajay Jain has published a useful white paper giving points on networking using LinkedIn:

<http://techgazing.com/TechGazing-WhyLinkedIn-v1.pdf>.

OTHER RESOURCES

Besides linkedin, there are other popular sites that you may prefer. Two that are very popular are www.Xing.com (for European networking), and www.Ecademy.com. Each of these sites have their own flavor. Check them out and signup!

Also, there are many good networking books. My personal favorite is, *Never Eat Alone*, by Keith Ferrazzi. Another choice is *Networking Your Way to Success*, by John Timperley.



BE A MENTOR

Finally, when networking, don't worry about whether or not someone is able to help you in return. As Keith Ferrazzi suggests in *Never Eat Alone*, *don't keep score*. Networking is not a win-lose negotiation where one person benefits at the cost of another. Your purpose is not to use others, but to help everyone.

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Always be on the lookout to give someone a leg-up—even if you don't benefit. Perhaps this means sending an email reference, or offering some encouragement to someone looking for a position. We're all winners when you genuinely invest yourself in others.²



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² For those further interested in the craft of mentoring, see Ron Lee Davis, *Mentoring: The Strategy of the Master* (Thomas Nelson).