



## 10 tips for increasing your professional visibility and exposure

Being recognized in your field can make you more valuable in your current job and more marketable if you decide to change jobs. The tips below can help you gain that visibility and exposure. The first four are aimed primarily at the employee of a company, while the rest apply either to the employee or to the independent consultant.

### #1: Develop your elevator talk

The elevator talk is the 15- to 30-second talk you would give to a senior executive while both of you are in an elevator. It's your chance to impress that person, so make the most of it. Important parts of the elevator talk include:

- Who you are
- What project you're working on
- A significant accomplishment you've made

### #2: Talk to bosses during office social events

During an office social event (for example, the holiday or Christmas party), it's generally easier to approach your boss and his or her boss to say hello. At those times, it's important to have your elevator talk prepared. Business talk is good, as long as you stay away from salary, benefits, and other personnel questions. Try to make your approach, if you can, out of the sight and earshot of your peers, so they don't think that you're being fawning toward your bosses.

### #3: Introduce yourself when in another location of your company

Your job may take you to another part of the country, where you might be working with another part of your company—for example, with a different branch office. In that case, make an effort to introduce yourself to the head of that office. You really don't need a formal appointment. Simply introduce yourself to that person's assistant and find out whether you can just "stick your head in the door" to say hello. Tell that person who you are and what you're doing for that person's office or staff.

### #4: Volunteer for company events

United Way drive... company picnic...holiday party. All of these events need company employees to run them. They take time, but helping with them can bring you recognition, especially if you're working side by side with upper-level people who one day could be your boss.

### #5: Speak to outside groups

Speaking to groups can give you credibility and increase your professional contacts. It also builds your own knowledge of your topic, because in researching and creating your talk, you inevitably will learn more about it.

Look for a topic you're familiar with and which would interest an audience. Focus on how your information can benefit audience members. Avoid simply repeating facts. Share any analysis you have done, offering insights for the audience. When looking for groups can speak to, consider industry and professional associations, local chambers of commerce, and service organizations, such as Rotary. Your initial talks probably will need to be given free of charge. However, as your reputation expands, you might be able to charge a fee for them.

One variant of speaking is to teach, perhaps at a local community college. Be aware, however, that such an obligation can involve significant preparation time and little pay.

### #6: Write for professional publications

Nothing beats seeing one's name in print, with a byline following the title. The same approach applies to writing as with speaking to groups: Pick a topic you know well and which would appeal to the readers of a publication. That means, of course, that you have to know the types of readers a publication has. Most publications will ask for a query letter or e-mail first. In it, you outline your proposed article and possibly submit samples of your previous work. On the other hand, I have gotten articles published simply by sending them in.

The publication *Writer's Market* has been tremendously helpful to me in this regard.

## **#7: Serve as a source for news media**

Reporters like to quote authorities when writing a story. If they quote you in print or on the air, your reputation is enhanced. Once you identify a reporter, introduce yourself by phone or e-mail. If you call, and the person answers, ask first whether the person is on deadline. If he or she is, offer to call back. Such a question indicates that you're sensitive to the reporter's time. If you're sending e-mail, include a biographical statement or resume if possible and stress why your knowledge is important to the reporter's readers, viewers, or listeners. If you work for a company, be careful about mentioning the company by name. Your employer might be upset if you appear to be speaking for the company rather than yourself.

## **#8: Mentor or advise a student group or club**

I've never done it, but advising a student group, such as a student chapter of the Association of Information Technology Professionals (AITP), is another way of gaining exposure and contacts.

## **#9: Moderate a panel discussion**

Even if you aren't able to give a presentation at a conference, you still might be able to participate by moderating a panel discussion. The responsibilities will vary depending on the conference and the conference organizer. However, most moderators are responsible for making sure the discussion starts and ends on time and that all participants have a chance to speak. You might want to have some questions prepared beforehand that you can ask the panel to answer.

When taking questions from the audience, always repeat the question so that the entire room (panelists and audience) can hear it.

## **#10: Serve as board member or officer of a professional association**

It's pretty easy to serve in either of these capacities because generally, no one wants to do it. If you're the treasurer, you'll be responsible for keeping track of money for the association, such as registration fees received for any conferences, and expenses incurred for speakers, facilities, and other reasons. The other officer and board positions generally are concerned with maintaining and increasing membership, for planning and finding speakers for meetings, and various administrative tasks. If you're willing to put in the time, having such an accomplishment would look good on a resume.

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## **Successful negotiating requires perspective and flexible thinking**

"We need this done right now"... "Can you deliver this afternoon?"... "I need you to work this Saturday!"

We all want something from someone else. At the same time, other people, usually customers or bosses, want things from us. The better we are at negotiating, the more successful we're likely to be — and the more likely it is that we'll keep our sanity. Here are some tips to get you there.

### **#1: Know as much as you can about the other person**

In his classic work *The Art of War*, the ancient author and strategist Sun Tzu discussed the importance of knowing the enemy as well as ourselves. He said:

- If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.
- If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you suffer defeat.
- If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.

When I conduct training for IT professionals in customer service, I often have attendees do an exercise in persuasion. I ask them first to think of a policy they think customers will resist (for example, asking that customers call a central help desk, rather than call individual IT staff people). Next, I ask them to think like the customer and list as many reasons as they can why following the policy would benefit them, the customer (as opposed to benefiting the IT person or department, although some reasons would involve benefits to both). Finally, I ask them to think of objections the customer might raise and how the IT person would address that objection. At the same time, I caution them that if they are unable to come with good responses to objections, they might need to reconsider the policy.

## #2: Distinguish between objectives and methods

Don't confuse objectives with methods of achieving those objectives or you'll restrict your thinking. The following story, from the book of Daniel, illustrates this point:

A young man long ago was being groomed, along with others, to take up official positions to serve a king. In doing so, these young men had to follow a royal diet. However, the young man's religious beliefs prohibited him from doing so. This refusal upset a supervising official, believing the resulting worse appearance of the young man would cost the official his life.

The young man made a deal with the official. He asked the official for a ten day test, during which he would eat only vegetables and drink only water. At the end of that time, the official saw how much better than the others the young man looked, and let him keep that diet.

The apparent objectives of the official (young man eats the royal food) and the young man (don't eat the royal food) conflict and are mutually exclusive. However, this view about objectives is wrong. The official's objective was not that the young man eat the royal food. His objective really was that the young man have a good appearance. Because that objective doesn't conflict with the young man's objective, it was possible to achieve both of them.

Let's say an executive needs a document right now, but he's having trouble with remote printing. Rather than spend large amounts of time trying to resolve the printing technology, what if you simply faxed a copy of the document?

## #3: Understand various options for resolving the situation

Once we understand objectives, we need to break down the situation to discover underlying issues. Then, we can look at various options, which include:

- **Varying time and sequence.** If you're asking someone to do a series of actions, do they all have to happen right now? What if some of them happened later? Do you care if they change the sequence of what they do, as long as you still get what you want?
- **Varying place.** Do you care where a particular action occurs or where a delivery is made? Can that action or delivery occur somewhere else?
- **Varying the person.** Do you really care who performs a requested task, as long as it happens?
- **Chunking.** Instead of dealing with a large issue, can it be worked on as smaller pieces? For example, the young man limited the dietary test to 10 days, rather than running it continuously until the time came to see the king. By setting a limit, both sides had time to take corrective action.

Here are some examples that illustrate how varying these options can help both parties reach an agreeable solution.

**Example 1:** You want a supplier to deliver 100 cartons of toner to one of your locations by next Friday. The supplier says it's a problem. Here are some questions to consider:

- How critical REALLY is the Friday date? What can the supplier deliver by that time — and is that amount something you can live with for the short term? Alternatively, when *can* the supplier deliver the full 100 cartons?
- What flexibility do you have with your office needs? Can you do other things in the meantime that don't involve this toner?
- Do you really need all the toner at that particular location? Are there alternate locations within your company where the supplier could deliver?
- Do you have to use this supplier? Can you ask another supplier or ask this one to subcontract to someone else?
- Do you have other obligations the supplier is fulfilling for you and are these other obligations hindering the Friday date? If so, how willing are you to let the Friday shipment take priority?

**Example 2:** I was once part of an application development team, and our project was the development of a new interactive voice response system involved with employee retirement plan information and transactions. In all, we had 10 programs to develop. Half of the programs allowed a caller to update and change information and perform

transactions, and the other half were simply inquire-only programs (for example, one program provided account balance information).

When it became clear that we would miss the delivery date, our project manager worked out an alternate arrangement with the project users. We would focus on finishing the inquiry-only programs by the original delivery date, then complete the other programs by a later date. The alternate plan worked, and the sponsor and users were happy with the system.

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## Why your IT department should present a united front

More than 1,500 people died when the *Titanic* sank on April 15, 1912. An iceberg had struck the starboard (right) side. Less than three hours later, the great ship was gone. Do you think any survivors from the port (left) side were thinking, "Good thing the iceberg hit the OTHER side"?

This point has relevance for your job. Suppose someone in the IT group is trying to resolve a problem with a customer. In doing so, he or she learns that a co-worker, Joe, from a different department within the IT group, gave wrong information to the customer, and that the information created or worsened the problem. Do you think that person would ever say:

- Joe told you WHAT??!
- Don't listen to Joe's department. They're all messed up.
- (Shaking head): \$&@ unbelievable.

These sentiments are understandable, and expressing them is easy. However, think about it from the customer's perspective. That customer wants the problem resolved quickly. Hearing that type of comment might cause the customer to think, "Why is this person wasting my time complaining about a co-worker?" More seriously, the customer might also think, "Those people in IT: Do they know what they're doing?"

The less familiar we are with an organization, region, or country, the less we can distinguish small details within it. You know, within your IT group, who the directors and managers are and what they do. You may have a help desk, an infrastructure team, an applications development team, and a data center team. You know the differences between these departments and you know who is where.

Chances are, though, your customer is less aware of these differences. To that customer, the boxes and lines under the CIO don't exist. All the customer sees is the big box and visualizes a label of *information technology*. Therefore, when one IT person criticizes another, the customer doesn't make a distinction but simply thinks, "IT has a problem." Witnessing this type of behavior can embarrass customers and can cause them to question the competence of the IT group.

You may think your criticism distances you from the other, problematic IT person. However, like the starboard damage to *Titanic*, this behavior affects and hurts the whole organization. In fact, one of my clients, the CIO of a major energy company, told me once that this type of behavior, in his mind, was grounds for termination.

I once called the office of the CIO of a major retailer and reached his assistant, whom we'll call Tina. After I explained why I was calling, Tina referred me to the CIO's director of client services. I then called that director and introduced myself and my work. However, when I told him how I was referred to him, the director became furious, saying, "If Tina did that, she's in a lot of trouble." Of course, I made little progress with that director, never hearing from him again.

His outburst was a perfect example of the port side *Titanic* passenger mentality. By making that statement to me, an outsider, he exposed divisions within the CIO organization. If I had been that director, here's what I would have done: I would have listened to the caller but would have said nothing about Tina's actions, even if I had a problem with them. Then, after hanging up, I would have gone to Tina and found out more.

If her actions were wrong, I would have spoken to her about it privately, working out an arrangement on handling future calls of that type. More important, if she had a good reason for giving the information (perhaps, for example, the CIO had told her to do so), finding out the details would prevent me from looking foolish and unprofessional.

## Postscript

I called back a few times afterward, trying to reach that director. The first time, I heard a voicemail saying that he was on an extended vacation. The next time, the voicemail said his new job responsibilities called for frequent travel. The last time, his voicemail said he was no longer with the company.

So how do we handle this situation? First, accept the fact that differences will occur. IT professionals may disagree on strategy, or choice of vendor, or schedule for rollout. Before a decision is made, you're free to voice your opinion. However, once the decision is made, it's best to support it. In other words, keep the dirty laundry hidden. Criticizing a decision or a co-worker publicly may mean serious consequences for you.

Second, realize that a co-worker who gives different information to a customer may not necessarily be wrong. That information may have been based on different assumptions or circumstances (for example, a different software release or system configuration). In such a case, when the customer tells you that Joe said something different, consider telling the customer that you will talk with Joe to understand what Joe said. Afterward, go back to the customer with advice that both you and Joe have agreed on.

Presenting a united front to the customer protects the reputation and image of the IT organization, and it can protect and enhance your career.

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## Interrupting others can sink your communications

9:30 P.M., Sunday April 14, 1912: As the *RMS Titanic* approaches the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, wireless operator Jack Phillips begins transmitting passenger messages to a lighthouse at Cape Race. The wireless system, fairly new at the time, had become a sensation to passengers. As a way of impressing friends, relatives, and business associates, passengers would send them messages from *Titanic*.

Phillips had had a difficult day. Twenty-four hours earlier, the wireless had broken down, and Phillips had worked until 5 A.M. Sunday morning to fix it. Those long hours, plus the large number of messages to transmit, have caused him to feel tremendous pressure.

At 11:00 P.M., while continuing to send passenger messages to Cape Race, Phillips receives a message from the Leyland liner *Californian*. Because of *Californian's* close distance to *Titanic*, the message blasts through Phillips's headset (imagine accidentally turning on your iPod while it's set to full volume). "Say old man, we are stopped and surrounded by ice," *Californian* says. Instead of acknowledging or acting on the message, Phillips, in a pique, replies, "Shut up! Shut up! I am busy. I am working Cape Race!" No further message comes from *Californian*.

Forty minutes later, *Titanic* strikes the iceberg, and 1,500 people lose their lives.

### Why do we do it?

When we interrupt people, we run risks by missing the information they were trying to give us. *Titanic* wireless operator Jack Phillips interrupted an important transmission because he thought he had more pressing matters to deal with. And although no one will say that this one incident was the sole reason for the *Titanic* disaster, it very well could have been a factor.

Why do we interrupt others? Most often we do so because we think we know what the other person is going to say. Rather than (in our mind) waste time, we simply answer according to what we think the other person is about to say.

Have you ever been interrupted this way? Think back on what happened. For example, maybe you:

- Called a company switchboard because you simply wanted to check the spelling of someone's name, but instead of giving you this information, the switchboard transferred you to that person.
- Explained to a receptionist that you spoke to person A in that company earlier, and now you need to speak to person B—but you're transferred back to person A anyway.
- Called a technical support help line and started explaining the situation, but before you could finish, the tech started giving you an answer (which most likely was totally irrelevant to your situation).
- Reached a switchboard after transferring out of someone's voicemail and tried to explain that you wanted to speak to an assistant (or other live person in that area), but before you could do so, you were put *back* in the person's voicemail.

Think about how annoyed you were when you were treated in this manner. Chances are that this way of communicating irritated you even if the other person was able to resolve your issue or problem. And if they failed, your irritation was probably even greater.

Why do we have this tendency to interrupt? A major reason lies in the different speeds at which we talk versus think. Nichols and Stevens, in a classic *Harvard Business Review* article, described this phenomenon. The average person speaks at a rate of about 125 words per minute. However, the human brain can process information at a significantly faster rate. The resulting impatience causes the listener to go off on mental sidetracks unrelated to the topic of discussion. Although the listener may catch himself or herself and return to the conversation, the speaker has moved ahead by that time. Catching up is hard, so the listener becomes tempted again to take a mental detour. As a result, the average listener may hear and understand only about half of what the speaker says.

## Information lost, projects derailed

Besides annoying people when we interrupt them, we can miss important information ourselves. According to a study that appeared in *Application Development Trends*, 63 percent of the reasons for IT project failure relate to the requirements phase of the systems development cycle (incomplete/changing requirements, lack of resources and unrealistic expectations, lack of user involvement, and poor planning and unclear objectives). In other words, the application developers often assume that they know what the user wants. The result is usually a system that has incorrect or incomplete function, is late, or is over budget.

## When—and how—to interrupt

What about long-winded people who talk endlessly about everything? Such people can take up valuable time, and we often just want them to get to the point. If you feel that you must interrupt that type of person, consider this approach:

- Tell the person what you think he or she "ultimately" was going to say (in other words, cut to the chase).
- Check with the person to see how correct your assessment was.

This technique lets you take control of the conversation but still allows the other person to respond. It gives you a way to hint that you want the person to get to the point, but it also gives him or her a chance to either to confirm or refute your understanding.

When listening to others, the best approach is to listen to everything they say, if possible. If they go on a little too long, you can try to politely interrupt them and summarize what you think their main point is. The worst approach is to interrupt just to make your own point, without trying to determine what their point was.

## How can you prevent others from interrupting you?

**#1: Phrase your comments so that they grab the interest of the other person.** In the 1987 James Bond movie *The Living Daylights* (the first one starring Timothy Dalton), our hero tells a group of Afghan fighters that criminals are selling arms in their area. When the fighters laugh at him, Bond reminds them that those arms could be used against the fighters, at which time they stop laughing and pay attention.

In the example of *Californian* and the iceberg warning, perhaps that sender would have been more successful if he had said instead, "Say old chap, we're wondering if you might be running into icebergs, because we're surrounded by them."

Speakers and writers refer to this device as a "grabber." This column, for example, uses the *Titanic* story as its own grabber.

**#2: Anticipate how the other person might interrupt.** Say you're a frontline help desk person who is escalating a trouble ticket to your level 2 or level 3 group. Think about the standard questions they might ask—and have answers ready. For example, you might say, "I confirmed that the user has the latest patches, that the configuration files are correct, and that the system has power." If you tell people what they need to know up front, you reduce the chance that they'll jump in and interrupt you before you've had a chance to give them the complete story.





























