

By Calvin Sun

Another year has arrived, and with it, the traditional resolutions. Below are 10 resolutions for IT professionals. None of them deals with diet or exercise, because we know most of those fail within two weeks. Instead, these resolutions are aimed at helping you expand your knowledge, sharpen your skills, develop better professional relationships, and advance your career.

## 1 Improve your communications skills

Anyone who thinks technical skills alone guarantees career success would do well to remember the fates of Operating System/2, Betamax, and the Dvorak keyboard. Though technically superior to their respective competitors, they nonetheless lost out to them. In the same way, the ability to communicate and work well with co-workers, bosses, and customers is invaluable to your career success. I've written frequently on this topic but can sum it up in three adages:

- Be quick to listen (for example, when learning about system requirements or doing problem determination).
- Be slow to speak (that is, try to hear the other person out before you yourself respond).
- Be slow to anger (when that upsetting e-mail arrives, wait a bit before responding and consider having a co-worker review your response first).

## 2 Become active in a professional organization

Becoming active means more than just filling out a membership form or page and coming to a meeting. It might mean, for example, serving on that organization's board of directors or setting up a meeting for the organization or even delivering a presentation yourself. Being active in the organization raises your visibility, highlights your abilities, and helps you gain professional contacts. Examples of IT-related organizations include the Association of Information Technology Professionals ([AITP](#)) and the Society for Information Management ([SIM](#)).

## 3 Reconnect with a former colleague, boss, or teacher

You've probably heard the adage about not burning your bridges. Or the one about being nice to people on your way up, because you'll meet them again on your way down. I hate to be pessimistic or cynical in this new year, but keeping in contact with people can help you professionally -- for example, in finding a new job. A considerable number of available jobs are never advertised. And even jobs that *are* advertised may not really be available, but only placed by an employer to test the waters.

Did you have a good working relationship with a former associate or manager? If so, reconnecting will allow you to relive those times. Did you have problems? Maybe now's the time to make up. I remember a former boss who mistakenly thought I was skirting proper procedures and was upset with me. A few years afterward, I contacted him to say hello, and we both had a good laugh about the whole thing.

Did you learn something valuable from this person? Let him or her know, particularly if your opinion of that person has improved since the time you worked together. Mark Twain once said that when he was 14, he couldn't stand how stupid his father was, but when he turned 21, he was amazed at how much smarter the old man had become in seven years. If you thought at the time a former boss was clueless but now recognize that boss's brilliance, say so.

## 4 Improve your usage and grammar skills

Is it "...the system and its functions" or "...the system and it's functions"? Does the task force have "nine" members or "9" members?\* Your grammar, spelling, and usage skills reflect on your professional ability and your credibility. Resolve to fix at least one issue that's been plaguing you in this regard. I suggest, as references, [The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage](#) and the classic Strunk and White work, [The Elements of Style](#).

## 5 Gain at least one compliment from your boss

The 1973 movie *The Paper Chase* follows a group of first-year Harvard Law School students in their contracts class, taught by the tyrannical Professor Kingsfield. Woe to any student who arrived unprepared or unable to answer his many questions. However, one day Hart, one of the students, gives a detailed but concise answer to one of Kingsfield's "hypos." The camera cuts to Kingsfield as he gives just the faintest trace of a nod, after which we see Hart whooping it up as he happily runs out after class.

Your boss generally has little reason to curry your favor. Therefore, the boss who compliments you most likely is sincere in doing so and recognizes a contribution or idea of yours. That recognition can help you later, when promotion and salary decisions come up. So be on the lookout for those "good idea" and "good job" comments from the boss.

## 6 Publish an article on a Web site such as TechRepublic

Writing articles for publication is a great way to gain exposure. For instance, TechRepublic reaches thousands of information technology professionals and executives, and writing for it could help build your resume. What's more, preparing and writing the article will help improve your own knowledge of the topic by forcing you to think about the topic itself, as well as how to express it clearly. [Editor's note: If you'd like to try your hand at writing a 10 Things piece, check out the [Blog Submission Tool](#) for TechRepublic members.]

## 7 Volunteer for an office event

The holiday party, picnic, or team-building event can be a pain to organize. You don't get paid extra for doing so, and you have your "real" job besides. However, if you get the chance to lead or organize an event, consider doing so. You will have the chance to show leadership and organizational skills and possibly to work with potential future bosses.

If the event already has an organizer, consider asking whether that person needs help. Just be careful that the organizer doesn't view your offer as encroaching on his or her turf. Handled correctly, however, such an offer gives you visibility and gains you an ally in the organizer.

## 8 Give a presentation at a conference

Delivering a presentation at a conference offers the same advantages as writing for a Web site. And if you pick the right conference, they might even pay your expenses -- something your own company's finance organization would appreciate.

## 9 Train a co-worker in some aspect of your job

What would happen if tomorrow you stepped in front of a bus? Could a co-worker step in and take over? If not, think about training someone in some aspect of your job.

"Wait a minute," you're saying. "If I do that, I become dispensable." True, you do run that risk. However, you also demonstrate that you are ready for your next promotion to a job of greater responsibility. You also show your boss that you're thinking about the good of the whole department.

## 10 Sidestep political discussions

From now until November we will be hearing constantly of the upcoming presidential election. Politics, like religion, can be a dangerous discussion topic. In your job, having someone upset at you is unlikely to advance your career. For that reason, it's generally best to sidestep such issues. Try to change the subject or make some noncommittal comment such as, "Thanks, that reminds me that I need to register to vote."


I wish you the best for 2008.

*\* The answer in both cases is the first option.*



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## Version history

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—The TechRepublic Content Team