

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Making Magic

By Douglas E. Welch

An important part of any high-tech career is the ability to answer any technical question as quickly as possible. Of course, as you know, it is impossible to keep the million different solutions to a million different problems in your head at the same time. This is why it is so important to make use of the tools you have. In fact, your own knowledge, combined with that of your high-tech friends and various Internet tools, can sometimes make your level of technical expertise seem almost magical.

Abacadabra

When you come into an office and solve a problem for your clients, to them it is magic. They don't spend all day, every day solving technology problems, so it can seem that you are pulling solutions out of thin air. Of course this isn't the case, but it can feel really good to have a quick solution at hand. You know that the solution comes from hundreds of hours of experience, fixing problems, reading tech notes, browsing Web sites and more. Still, it can help to realize exactly how special your talents are and how they are viewed by your clients.

This doesn't mean that you purposely try to hide information to make your own knowledge seem even more special. Unlike a real magician, you shouldn't seek to hide your magic, but instead develop ways to teach users how it is done. While you might think that this could diminish your skills in the eyes of your clients, it can have exactly the opposite effect. Sharing your skills and knowledge, and how you acquired that knowledge, shows your clients the hard work and dedication required to develop your skills.

Friends and Neighbors

Often the best sources of your magic are those tech-savvy people around you. Through the years, I've made friends who are also—surprise—computer consultants. Luckily, while we have some overlap in our skills, we each have our own unique specialties. I deal mainly with Macintosh computers and networking, one friend is a Windows expert and network manager, and another is a wizard with digital video and all types of media.

Together, we have developed an informal consultancy. If any of us runs into a particularly difficult issue, we know we can call the others to help work through it. Learn to work together with your tech-savvy friends. The relationship can be as loose or formal as you wish, but its usefulness as an enhancement to all your careers cannot

be denied. In some cases, you might even find that a partnership with these friends can yield even greater results.

The Internet

Using the Internet can add greatly to your "consultancy," as well. You can imagine the benefit of having millions of tech-savvy friends all across the globe. More importantly, it doesn't take any special skills or large amounts of money to begin mining the Internet for the solution to your technology problems.

The first place I usually turn when researching a problem is Google (www.google.com). I find that using a general-purpose search engine helps me to refine my understanding of a problem even if it doesn't lead me to a final solution.

When building your search, try to think about how others may have described their problem. I recently ran into an issue where random words were appearing whenever a client tried to use his word processor. After a little thought, I tried "random typing virus" as my search term. Within the first three pages of results, I happened across someone describing a very similar problem. Sure enough, her solution worked for me, as well. Had I not turned up this link, I could have added additional terms like Windows, Dell (it was a Dell computer) or others.

If searching the Web hadn't helped, I could have searched Google's archive of Usenet newsgroup postings. Often, this will turn up the most current information available, and can be very helpful if the problem has been noticed only recently.

You may think you would be better off using manufacturers' support Web sites when looking for solutions. I have found, though, that due to bad indexing or a poor description of the problem, you often will not find the most direct answer to your problem. In almost every case, the general search engine has led me to a solution, usually with links to the manufacturer's tech notes, that I hadn't been able to find using the company's Web site. If nothing else, my general search can give me a better way to word the problem when searching a manufacturer's database.

Regardless of your experience level, you can make a little magic in your own high-tech career by using the tools that life and the Internet put at your disposal. Consult your friends and coworkers, search the Internet, and you will find ways to increase your expertise to magical levels. □

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