



For some, networking is as easy as one, two, three. For others, it's a daunting prospect. However, everyone knows that personal contacts can be a valuable business resource.



Building your network

There are thousands of books on the subject of effective networking. To help simplify things, *A Plus* asked Cecilia Yeung, country manager of Success Resources, a career counselling and event management firm, for the most important points on the subject. Here's her advice.

- 1. Join the club.** Get involved with associations and clubs that you have a personal interest in – if you enjoy what you're doing, you'll be at your most comfortable and amiable. If you join a club, take a leadership role whenever possible. Not only will you practice skills that will be important later on in your career, you may also come to the attention of other leaders-in-waiting.
- 2. Value your time.** Go to events or gatherings where you will learn something, derive fulfillment or be able to make a contribution. Volunteer your time (not money) for a community project. Not only is it rewarding, you will earn respect and meet a diverse range of people.
- 3. Add a string to your bow.** Develop new skills by taking public speaking, language or leadership courses. This will open channels with like-minded people and make you more adaptable in different social situations.
- 4. Listen.** When meeting someone, don't try to impress by immediately going over all the points of your résumé. Instead, build rapport, listen and ask questions to find out more about this person. There'll be time to discuss business later.
- 5. Get serious.** If you are at a networking event, be prepared. Eat before you go. Bring up-to-date cards and be aware of current events. Don't intrude on two-person conversations and avoid staying with one person all night.

Assembling a contact network cannot be done overnight. To be effective means staying conscious of your objectives. Be clear about the nature of the relationship you have with each person you meet and keep in mind the areas where you are seeking to expand your network.

Finally, remember that communications skills are something to be exercised. Practice making informal conversation wherever possible. If you think you can help the people you meet in some way, offer help. Your offer will be remembered and reciprocated. Finally, stay in touch with the people you meet. It could be the difference between finding out about a great new job before the competition, and reading about a new appointment later on.



BY CARSON CHENG

IT TIPS

Hot dating advice

Making Microsoft Excel work for you

Spreadsheets are ubiquitous in our workplaces. Most users had been enjoying the flexibility and power offered by spreadsheets – until the Sarbanes-Oxley clock started ticking.

By now, slightly more than one year before the overseas deadline for Sarbanes-Oxley compliance, both management and spreadsheet users should have understood the potential risks behind their neatly aligned cells – and the urgent need to devise tighter controls. Spreadsheets should be classified according to their complexity and purpose and those with high risk should be screened out for more stringent control measures. Unfortunately, the literature rarely addresses an important step: How exactly spreadsheets should be built? Most IT departments do an excellent job in network administration but few know Excel well enough to offer advice in this area.

In coming issues, I will offer some hands-on tips on engineering Sarbanes-Oxley compliant spreadsheets – particularly in the area of access control, input control, security and integrity of data. In this issue, as a warm-up exercise, let's look at the treatment of dates in Excel – after all, we are all daunted by deadlines.

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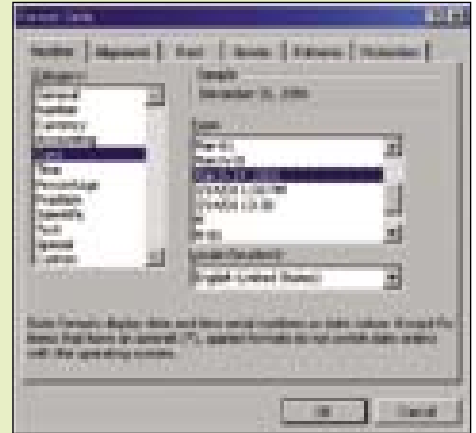
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What's in a date

Few people realise that dates in Excel are actually represented by an integer, or serial number. 1990/01/01 is represented by 1, 1990/01/02 by 2, and so and so forth. 2006/12/31, the deadline of Sarbanes-Oxley, is represented by 39,082.

When you insert today's date (Shortcut key: <Ctrl>+;), Excel calculates and stores the serial number, and then changes the number format of the cell to a date so you can see the date in the default date format (British, American, or Chinese style).

You can change the appearance of the date easily by choosing Locale and Type under "Format | Cells | Number | Date" (Shortcut key: <Ctrl>+1). For example, you can change 31/12/2006 to "December 31, 2006" with Locale set to "English (United States)".



If you want a cell to always show the current day, use =TODAY(). If you want to show the following date, use =TODAY()+1. The date a week away from the date in Cell A1 is =A1+7.

DATE(), YEAR(), MONTH(), and DAY() are all useful functions when we manipulate dates. =DATE(2006,12,31) returns the SOX deadline. To add one month to the date in Cell A1, use =DATE(YEAR(A1),MONTH(A1)+1,DAY(A1)). This also works even if A1 is a day in December. Excel is smart enough to do the math. You can also switch on Analysis ToolPak under "Tools | Add-ins" and enter =EDATE(A1,1). You have to manually change the number format to Date (<Ctrl>+1).

The year-end date of the date in Cell A1 is =DATE(YEAR(A1),12,31). How about month ends? This one is a little tricky. Though the last days of months vary, the following days are always the first: We deduct one day from the first day of the following month. The month end of the date in Cell A1 is hence:

=DATE(YEAR(A1),MONTH(A1)+1,1)-1, or simply =DATE(YEAR(A1),MONTH(A1)+1,0). You can also use Analysis ToolPak: =EOMONTH(A1,0).

Quarter ends? =DATE(YEAR(A1),INT((MONTH(A1)+2)/3)*3+1,0). INT((n+2)/3)*3 rounds n up to the nearest 3.

Since dates are simply numbers, you can do calculation directly on dates. =B1-A1 returns the number of days between A1 and B1. Excel automatically applies date format to the result, so you have to manually switch the number format back to General or Number (<Ctrl>+1).

To compose a sentence with a date from another cell, you can use TEXT() to convert the date into text and define its format, and then use the ampersand operator (&) to connect the text together. Note that text must be wrapped by a pair of double quotation marks.

	Formula	Result
1	=TODAY()	10/10/2005
2	=TODAY()+1	10/11/2005
3	=TODAY()+7	10/17/2005
4	=DATE(2006,12,31)	31/12/2006
5	=DATE(YEAR(A1),MONTH(A1)+1,DAY(A1))	31/01/2006
6	=EDATE(A1,1)	31/01/2006
7	=EOMONTH(A1,0)	31/10/2005
8	=DATE(YEAR(A1),INT((MONTH(A1)+2)/3)*3+1,0)	31/03/2006
9	=B1-A1	10
10	=TEXT(TODAY(),"&A1-TODAY()& days in delay")	10 days in delay



Creative accountants

Creativity. Everybody in business wants their staff to have it. Bosses know the importance of it. Entrepreneurs thrive on it. And if you aren't doing something to encourage it, you may not be doing the most important job of today's manager. Here's some common sense advice on establishing the right environment for your staff.



Collaborate, don't compete

A little competition is a good thing. Too much can stifle the best work. When you have teams of people assigned to a task, be vigilant in looking for any signs of tension in the group. Employees who feel rightly or wrongly that they are competing for recognition will withhold vital information from their colleagues. The most creative teams are the ones who feel they will be rewarded as a team.

One solution is to rotate people to different groups for different tasks. People respond to each other in different ways, so creative inspiration may come from the most unlikely of sources.

No fear of failure

What happens when somebody in your team fails? Disapproving looks? A dressing down? For accountants, the consequences of a mistake can be far more profound. Punishment serves a purpose, and when the rules are broken there have to be consequences. But failures also have to be seen as learning experiences.

A study of creativity in the workplace by Teresa Amabile of Harvard Business School found that while people are happy when they come up with a creative idea, they are much more likely to come up with a creative idea if they were happy the day before, too. In other words, happiness and creativity work in a virtuous circle, whereas fear and anxiety work in a downward spiral. Fear blocks creativity.

Account for humour

Humour is a valuable and underused part of a manager's toolbox. Laughter has been shown to boost the body's respiratory and immune systems. American firms GE, IBM and Southwest Airlines all employ humour consultants to inject fun into the office environment and boost productivity. Southwest Airlines even states on the recruitment page of its website that new employees must have a sense of humour.

So while the workplace can't be a non-stop laugh fest, there are a few simple steps to get the ball rolling. One practical solution is a weekly e-newsletter featuring humorous stories and photos from around the office. Putting someone different in charge of the newsletter from time to time gives different people the chance to leave their creative stamp on the organisation.

As a manager, avoid making fun of others. Look first to yourself for humour. A small, self-deprecating joke can take a lot of stress and tension out of a situation, while producing a more open, welcoming environment.

Remove time barriers

The great irony is that most people think they are most creative when under time pressure. Amabile's study reveals that far from helping the creative process, time pressures suppress creativity, both before and after the deadline. The drop off in creative thinking is due to the fact that people become less engaged in alternatives and more engaged in simply finishing a task. Simply put, people need time to let problems and ideas incubate, to develop creative new methods, products and services.

Trickle down theory of enjoyment

When people enjoy their work, they do it better. Nobody seriously doubts that. But the fact remains that large corporations can be intimidating and this can compromise the creative power of their workforces. As manager, it is up to you to help establish the environment in which creativity can take place.

The term "creative accounting" may have negative connotations, but creativity, morale and productivity all go hand in hand. If, after reading this, you gaze upon a silent group of employees, it may be time to take things in hand and start the creative ball rolling.