

Advance Your Tech Career in One Simple Step

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Your career is less about you than you think it is

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You don't need another list of 24 things you can do to advance your career this year. No one has time to focus on that many things and most of them make little difference. It's better to select one thing that will make a big difference and focus on that exclusively. So this year, advance your career by doing only one thing. There's probably no single investment in your career that will pay off more.

Think less about yourself and more about the people around you.

Don't worry. I'm not suggesting that the world will be filled with flowers and puppies if we all stop being selfish and self-centered. I'm not talking about trying to change the fundamentals of human nature. This is a pragmatic and reasoned approach for geeks to respond to changes in the technical labor market.

In this white paper you will learn about:

- The future of geek careers
- How focusing more on others advances your career
- How you can become everyone's go-to geek
- How to comfortably stay on the radar



Leading Geeks is an education and consulting firm dedicated to unlocking the value of technical people. Leading Geeks taps this value by transforming the tricky relationships between technical and non-technical groups at the executive, management and project level. You can contact them at paul@leadinggeeks.com.



The future of geek careers

We're all contractors now. For nearly 30 years, the nature of employment has been rapidly evolving. The idea of working your whole career for a single company is long since dead. More and more people are becoming contractors, mobile and independent. In fact, one recent study predicted that by 2020 half of the American workforce will be independent contractors. And even for the people who have traditional jobs, stability will remain elusive.

This isn't necessarily such a bad thing. Chances are that no one is slamming doors in your face, preventing you from pursuing your dreams. But neither is anyone waiting to open doors for you either.

If you want a great career, you're going to have to create it for yourself. No matter how fantastic your company or nurturing your boss, their primary role is not to plan the trajectory of your career. Whether you get the chance to have a fulfilling and lucrative work life is up to you. Even if you're not a contractor, you need to start thinking like one.

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Mainstream advice is inadequate. Most career advice is aimed at people with very different worldviews than us geeks. Few of us chase power, money or fame. We'd die of boredom with a 4-hour work week. And we don't look to our careers to provide spiritual enlightenment.

To us the quality of our career is measured by the nature of the problems we get to solve, the elegance of the solutions we get to build and the difference we can make with those solutions. For us career planning is about figuring out how to get the chance to solve great problems on an ongoing basis.

Mainstream career advice rarely takes this into account. So you end up wading through suggestions that just don't seem to apply. Most of the latest ideas seem to cluster into three distinct themes.

Unhelpful Suggestion # 1 ***Follow your passion***

Do you have a mission statement for your career? Do you really know where you want to be 15 years from now? 10? 5? Next year? Yeah. I didn't think so. Me either.

It's unrealistic. In technology, things change too fast. No one really knows what technology will be important or even how IT jobs will be structured 10 years from now. Will we all be contractors? Will computers start programming themselves? Will the cloud eliminate the need for internal IT departments? (OK, I doubt that any of these will happen, but they

have all been predicted.)

Passion is not our way. We pride ourselves on being a rather dispassionate lot, devoted to logic. Can you imagine Mr. Spock writing out a statement about his passions? Being asked to plumb the depths of my innermost desires has always felt uncomfortable. My strongest desire is to solve problems out in the world, not express my hidden yearnings.

Unhelpful Suggestion # 2 ***Develop your skills***

career development, we focus almost exclusively on skill development.

Unfortunately, skill growth doesn't necessarily lead to career development. We just like to think it will because we love learning. It's true that you might not get a job because of a lack of skills, but it doesn't follow that having skills creates job opportunities. The highway of technology career advancement is littered with rusting heaps that used to be highly-skilled, finely-tuned machines that stalled because someone forgot to put gas in the tank. As we will see the real fuel for your career is the good will you generate by being good to work with.

So while the advice to develop skills is good for the general population, for us it's like giving heroin to an addict. Adding one more package or one more certification to your resume will make little difference in your ability to get the opportunity to work with good people on meaty problems.

Advising geeks to develop skills is like giving heroin to an addict.

Unhelpful Suggestion # 3 ***Grow your network***

We tend to be introverts. Merely the idea of attending events with hordes of people that I don't know and have no reason to meet other than a vague sense that they might be helpful in the future sounds like torture to me. Even the less mercenary version of seeking to meet random people with the intention of being helpful to them gives me the horrors.

We might be slightly more comfortable with the idea of virtual networking in social media. This can be a good tool for maintaining existing relationships, but it's no substitute for genuine human connection.

How focusing on others advances your career

A new model, just for geeks. What we need is a way to think about career development that is compatible with both our personalities and the nature of the work we do. We need to think about what a successful career looks like in light of unpredictable technological change and high labor mobility. So if we assume that chaos is the norm, then devising an artificially stable goal is a waste of time. We need to think about this in more probabilistic terms.

In (pseudo) mathematical terms, it might look something like this.

$$\textit{Probability (Fulfilling Career)} = f(\textit{Number of Opportunities, Ability to Select Wisely})$$

Where:

Number of Opportunities = How many job/project opportunities you are aware of and are offered

Ability to Select Wisely = Your ability to select from among the options in ways that maximize your career fulfillment

In other words, the more opportunities you have and the more able you are to select from them in ways you find fulfilling, the more likely you are to have a fulfilling career.

I'm not going to presume to tell you what your criteria for selecting opportunities should be. That's up to you. But no matter what your personal preferences are, the more opportunities you have to choose from, the more likely you are to have some good options. So if we agree that the key variable to focus on is generating opportunities, the question is "How?"

How geeks can generate opportunities. This is where we as geeks have to confront a rather disturbing truth. We assume that the number of opportunities presented to us should be based solely on the degree of our skills. We presume that if life were fair, the smartest and most productive people would always be in the highest demand. That's why we invest so heavily in skill development.

The reality is something more like this:

Number of Opportunities =

f (Luck, Capabilities) +

f (Capabilities, Quality of Experience, Top of Mind Awareness)

Where:

Luck = The random chance that you find an opportunity through no intentional effort of your own or of anyone you know

Capabilities = The breadth and depth of your technical, organizational and managerial skills

Quality of Experience = How positively people *feel* about their experience working with you

Top of Mind Awareness = How likely people who know you are to think of you when they become aware of an opportunity.

In other words, there are two basic ways opportunities arrive on your doorstep in this environment. In both cases your capabilities are not the dominant factor in drawing opportunities toward you.

Scenario one – Pure Luck

You get lucky and fantastic opportunities magically rain down upon you that fit perfectly with your skill set. This is nice when it happens but I wouldn't want to bet my career on it being a regular occurrence. You can't really control this.

Scenario two – Good Experience

This one you have a lot more control over. The people who know you bring opportunities to you that they think would be a good fit for you. As people move from job to job or contract to contract they find problems that need solving and positions that need to be filled. So who do they call? They call the people they feel comfortable with and confident about. They call people who they feel are:

- Competent
- Trustworthy
- Good to work with
- Someone they are proud to refer
- And someone that comes to mind as a good fit for the problem they're trying to solve

In short, people bring opportunities to people that they have had a good experience working with in the past.

Now you see how you can advance your career in one simple step. The more you pay attention to the experience that the people around you have of working with you, the more likely they are in the future to invite you to do more work. Paying more attention to their experience is not only a nice thing to do that makes you more effective in your current position; it is also an investment in your future career prospects.

Paying attention to their experience is not only a nice thing to do, it's a good investment in your career.

The Story of Eduardo and Tom.

A few years back I worked with a man named Eduardo who didn't seem to be following any of the career advice you hear these days. He didn't have a mission statement. He didn't work his brand. He didn't go out for beers with us after work. He wasn't outgoing or extroverted in any way. But I would jump at the chance to work with him again, and I would be happy to refer him to any anyone in my network, confident that he would do a good job for them and make me look good in their eyes.

On another project, I worked with a very affable man named Tom. He was smart, friendly, outgoing, and full of ideas. He socialized with everyone and always wanted to help. But I would not choose to work with him again and probably wouldn't recommend him for much of anything.

The difference is that Eduardo, in his own introverted way, was very focused on more than just doing his job well. He was also very attentive to how the rest of us were experiencing working with him. He paid attention to some very basic things that made working with him a great experience. Here's what he did:

- When he communicated, he made sure we understood.
- When he said he'd do something, he did it or kept us informed on his progress.
- When he saw someone struggling with the workload, he offered to pitch in.
- When he made a mistake, he took responsibility for the error and the impact it had on others.
- When he saw opportunities to streamline our work, he respectfully brought it to our attention.
- When he worked with other people, not just his boss, he was consistently thoughtful and helpful.

In short, he was trustworthy. Based on my experience of working with him, I trust his work ethic, his values, and his competence.

Tom also focused on other people's experience, but in a completely different way. He focused on using

his gift of gab to create a sense of personal friendship rather than a good experience of himself as a work partner. He was highly skilled in a narrow range of processes. He made sure that we knew that he knew the right way to do things. He was rigid and didn't listen to other people's points of view. In the end, he got little done. Based on my experience working with him, I couldn't in good conscience recommend him to anyone else. I'm not confident that he'd do a good job but I am pretty sure that he would make me look bad for having recommended him. However, I'd gladly go out to dinner with him, because he's a very nice guy and great company.

I tell you about Eduardo and Tom because they represent two vastly different approaches to focusing on the experience that your colleagues and customers have of you. If you follow most of the career advice that is out there, you are more likely to end up like Tom, focusing on networking and skill building, while neglecting what really matters. The real fuel of any career, what draws opportunities to you, is the quality of the experience people have of working with you.

How you can become everyone's go-to geek

Now that you have a sense of how important it is to give people the feeling that you are good to work with, you might be a little annoyed and perplexed, saying to yourself, "I studied computer science, not psychology!" The good news here is that few computer science students carried a second major in psychology.

This represents a huge opportunity and you don't have to be Dr. Phil to take advantage of it. Thinking just a little about other people's experience can give you a tremendous competitive advantage in the technical labor market. People who work in technology have a reputation of being incredibly difficult to work with (see side bar), and if you give people the feeling that you are helpful, thoughtful, and reliable, you will shine like a road flare on a dark night.

Predictable resistance.

Most geeks, when first encountering the idea of creating a good work experience for their colleagues and customers, feel vaguely resistant. We like to focus on objective reality, not subjective experience. In part, that's why we chose to work with technology in the first place. Creating a subjective experience for another person seems wrong, somehow intrusive, manipulative and inappropriate.

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objective reality, not
subjective
experience.

You're going to just have to get over it. Creating a good experience for another person is not the same thing as self-serving manipulation.

Non-geeks, don't have this aversion. In fact, they expect you to think about their experience and work to make it a good one. Not only do they expect it, they are appalled when we don't. They are frequently mystified by what they see as our callous disregard of their feelings, when we're just trying to respect their boundaries. But remember, your intentions are invisible to them.

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6 ways to create a good experience of working with you.

Here are six simple things you can do to give the people you work with a good experience of you as a work colleague.

1. When you communicate, make sure you are understood.

When we give presentations, one of our favorite slides says "Messaging is not communicating." Broadcasting is what most geeks do and that's not the same thing at all. Too many of us think that communicating looks something like this:

1. Gather data
2. List it in an email
3. Hit send
4. Wait three weeks
5. Blame them when they didn't respond or follow directions

Messaging is not communicating.

There are a few things you need to do to ensure that your message was received and understood.

Tell them why it matters. Many people can't process information without some sense of context, urgency or responsibility for it. Most people need to be told why they should care before they can even begin to pay attention to information.

Make it safe to ask questions. A lot of people don't like to ask us questions. We give them confusing answers that often sound condescending. If they feel that asking you a question is going to result in useless information and a feeling of inadequacy, they're not going to bother asking. Let them know that

you expect them to have questions as this is not their specialty and that you'll be happy to answer as best you can. Then explain things in a way that they can understand.

Help them through their confusion. Sometimes people don't even know what questions to ask. They know that they are confused, but don't have enough understanding to even formulate a coherent question. This makes them feel really bad. Watch for their expressions. When you notice one, just say something like, "You look confused. Can I help?" They will then try to explain what they understood and you get the chance to make sure that they got what you wanted them to get.

If you want people to have a good experience of working with you, you need to take responsibility not only for what you say but for ensuring that they got the message.

2. When you say you'll do something, do it or keep people informed on your progress.

Most geeks are extraordinarily committed to doing what they promise. Despite our rather dismal industry-wide project delivery record, most of us deeply care about hitting deadlines. So when we find that we can't fulfill on one of our promises, it's rather painful to call up the person we've let down and tell them.

So what do we do? We avoid it. We justify it to ourselves. "Oh, John is busy and won't notice that I'm late." "I'll catch up on the weekend and Friday is the same as Monday...right?"

What you don't realize is that as painful as missed deadlines are for your colleagues, mismanaged expectations are much, much worse. Unforeseen delays are things that people can relate to and often make allowances for. But mysterious, unexplained non-delivery makes people crazy. They invent stories to explain it, stories about you that are not flattering and will not advance your career.

You must keep people informed when you don't meet their expectations, otherwise they will think the worst of you, and not want to work with you in the future.

Missed deadlines
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3. When you see someone struggling, offer to pitch in.

Everyone is busy and stressed these days. But there's a difference between being busy and being overwhelmed. You can see when someone is thrashing. They are highly active, frenzied even, but nothing is getting done. It's a lot like seeing an overwhelmed computer thrash.

When you see someone in that situation, offer to help if you can. Just say something like, “I can see that you’ve got way too many things on your plate. Is there anything I can do to help?” Even if you can’t they will really appreciate your noticing their difficulty.

Favors beget favors.

Obviously, you can’t help other people at the expense of getting your own work done, but often there are things you can do with very little effort that make a big difference for them.

And if you are going above and beyond, it’s wise to humbly note that you are stepping outside your normal role. Not only will it make them appreciate the effort, it will help avoid any future role confusion, lest they get the idea that this is what you usually do.

This also triggers the Law of Reciprocation, a concept highlighted by Robert Cialdini, in which he notes that human beings are wired to return favors. A favor freely given is one of the most powerful ways to establish relationships with other people, because their biological imperative tells them to respond in kind someday. Perhaps that day will be when their new company is looking for a new Director of Infrastructure, and they just happen to think of you.

4. When you make a mistake, take responsibility for the error, the impact it had, and the resolution.

There are few things at work that cause more outrage than someone ducking responsibility for their mistakes. Small problems can suddenly escalate into huge battles when people try to avoid accountability. The initial mistake is no longer the issue at hand, but when people’s innate sense of justice is violated, it triggers powerful reactions.

People trust those who take responsibility for their mistakes.

At the same time, nothing can defuse a tense situation faster than simply acknowledging your part in creating it. To do this, all you have to do is:

- Take responsibility for the facts of what happened
- Acknowledge the impact it had on them
- Say how you will avoid it in the future

If these three things don't happen, the stink of the mistake will stick to you. You will be remembered as someone who can't be trusted. However, if these three things do happen, it's very likely that you will be seen as human, be forgiven, and be considered a trusted colleague.

In fact, people usually trust those who take responsibility for their mistakes much more than people who appear to make no mistakes at all.

5. When you see something that could be improved, make appropriate suggestions.

When you see opportunities for improvement, you have three options:

1. Complain (either privately or publically)
2. Do nothing because it's someone else's problem
3. Suggest alternative approaches if appropriate

Make sure suggestions don't come off as indictments.

When it comes to how people experience working with you, complaining is the worst. You can see the problem, but only want to put down others and take no part in fixing it. Assuming that it is someone else's problem is a bit better, but you get the reputation for not caring. The best is obviously #3.

The key to making suggestions for improvements is making sure that people don't feel like you are trying to make an indictment of the way things work now. It's very easy for people to become defensive and resent your attempt to help.

So here's some advice on how to make suggestions for improvements:

Choose wisely, don't rattle off everything that needs fixing, just one or two things that will make a difference.

Acknowledge that you understand that the way things work now have their own logic, that you see that they are this way for a reason, possibly even a good reason.

Be specific about the experience that made you think about this improvement. When a suggestion comes with the story of the experience that made you think of it, it seems more organic and less like you trying to be a know-it-all.

Reference how this has worked elsewhere, preferably something that you saw first-hand.

Referencing material you read can make you seem pedantic if you lay it on too thick.

Discuss implementation considerations. You don't have to have all the details, but it helps to show that you thought about the work implications.

Give a sense of the magnitude of the benefit. If someone has all the decision-making factors in front of them, then it is fairly simple for them to consider the suggestion. If you suggest something without these factors, it can seem like half-baked nattering.

6. When working with people, regardless of status, be consistently thoughtful and helpful.

You want everyone who encounters you to have the same experience of working with you. If you only focus on "important people" you get labeled as a suck-up or a self-serving jerk. You're never too old to get labeled as the teacher's pet.

And from a purely self-centered career point of view, you never know who will become a source of a future opportunity. Today's admin may be tomorrow's CEO.

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How to comfortably stay top of mind

No matter how good an experience someone had of you in the past, they will only bring you opportunities if they think of you at just the right moment.

Do not confuse this with networking. This is not about meeting new people. This is not about leveraging a contact to pull strings for you with their powerful friends. This is not about self-promoting. This is also not related to looking for a job. This is not part of a short term campaign to fulfill your immediate needs. It's part of a long term plan to advance your career. Quite simply, it is about staying in touch with people you enjoy, respect or are interested in.

Staying in touch with people you like is good, no matter how you slice it. It's good for them, because people like to be liked, remembered and thought of. It's good for you because you'll get more opportunities, and you'll know more about what's going on in the industry. The more people you keep in touch with, the more you learn.

This is one that we find lots of excuses for not doing. See if any of these sound familiar:

- I'm too busy
- They're busy and I'll be annoying them
- They'll think that I'm just trying to get something from them
- It's been too long and they won't remember me
- It's been too long and I'll feel bad for not having called before
- I didn't respond last time they reached out
- They won't respond and I'll feel bad
- I don't have an agenda, so I'm wasting their time

While the list can go on and on, I'll tell you from personal experience that if you do this well, people will really appreciate it. I've been pleasantly surprised how happy people are to reconnect. Just remember that:

- If they don't respond, it probably has nothing to do with you. They're probably busy.
- They make choices about how to spend their time and if they call you back, it is because they want to.
- If it's been a long time, they might feel awkward that they haven't contacted you.
- If you feel bad about having not responded to them in the past, just say so.
- Broadcasting on social media is no substitute for personal connection.

Doing this requires scheduling just a little. Don't make a career out of it. Spend about 15-30 minutes a week reaching out to people you've worked with in the past. Make it a ritual, the same time and day each week. Here are some ideas for how to reach out:

| | |
|---|---|
| Just say hello. | "Hi, just wondering how you are doing." |
| Say you've been thinking of them. | We launched a new system, and reminded me of that time we..." |
| Let them know what's new with you. | "Thought you might like to know we finally got a dog." |
| Ask an easy question about something they have knowledge about. | What do you think about this ERP module?" |
| Look on LinkedIn to see if they've had any life changes and wish them luck. | "Saw that you got a new position. Seems like a great fit. Congratulations and good luck." |

This may or may not lead to a phone call or lunch. You may not even get a response. If they read the note or listened to your voice mail, you have done your job. It's possible that neither you nor they want a full blown reconnection. That's just fine. You're not going to talk to them every week afterward. You're just keeping each other at top of mind, and that will feel satisfying to you both.

Conclusion

So this year, don't pay any attention to the endless lists of hot topics and skills. To advance your career, focus on the one thing that isn't going to change. Good relationships create future opportunities. And those opportunities are the raw materials from which your career will be sculpted.

Thinking a bit less about yourself and more about the experience of the people around is an investment that will pay dividends both immediate and long term. And you may also be surprised at how much more you enjoy your work when you see the happiness you create for others.



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