

## How to deal with an unresponsive SME?

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Let's assume that you are new at the job and you just have found out that the SME you are supposed to work with is so busy that he scarcely has any time for you. What's worse, you've been trying to reach him for the last two weeks and without success! Your nightmare is about to begin. But don't worry, still SMEs are people like you and me.

### **Find out about SME as much as possible**

People love to gossip but from the whole bunch of information there must be something nice that you could use. Go around the office for some chat with the team members, look at SME's social media profile or even search the Internet. As they say: if somebody doesn't exist in the Internet, he doesn't exist at all. Perhaps he is a traveller and chocolate lover? Does he have a pet? Does he like helping at some local community? It is good to have an elevator pitch when you "accidentally" meet him or her in the office corridor. Even if you have to wait for this elevator for an hour! In case of home office work you may snip some private information in an email or via an official chat like Slack. At last, you are together and it's time for you to start a conversation. Don't rush into official talk but start with private matters. It would be good to mention some private problem that is of SME's interest. People love to give advice! And even more, they are keen on people with the same hobbies. Don't forget to show admiration and delight at SME's opinion or solutions. Time is short so ask the SME for lunch to continue your conversation. Once you'll find yourself in some circle of SME's attention it will be much easier for you to switch smoothly to professional matters.

### **Make a deep dive into the subject**

A person that is always in a hurry hates when their time is wasted so remember to be well-prepared for the topic. Try to set a meeting. Most probably you will see each team member's calendar. Approach the SME directly so as to propose two or three different meeting dates. It will show that you value SME's time. Then rush into your computer and set a meeting in their electronic calendar. Even if they don't accept the meeting, the alert a few minutes ahead of time will pop up on their computers. Bring a recorder and a list of relevant questions, however, make sure that the interview is not only in a question-answer mode. Think of it more as an opportunity to discuss the product so do make sure that information you are looking for can't be found easily. You may have only one chance to carry out such a meeting. Clarify what you find unclear or misunderstood, ask for some drafts, pictures or illustration. At the end of the interview find out if there is any chance to meet again in some time ahead for possible further questions. Or perhaps an SME will have a chance to flick through your work? It's always better to know what you can expect. If you feel positive SME's attitude ask for a possible deadline as people are much more likely to respond to what is set (for example: "Please let me know the best time for you next week").

However, let's imagine that your sneak peeks didn't come out the way you planned. What's next?

**Attend each team's meeting.** It is not only a perfect way to find out what is going on within the project but also what is going on in your team's private matters. Maybe you will have a chance to find out about some after-hours meeting and join it? When you know your team (and your SME) the work goes easier. Or some team member is a friend of SME and may say a few good words about you.

**Offer your expertise.** How about offering your help in a different field? Proofread a report or language correction of some presentation may be a good solution to be remembered. Offering help shows your openness and understanding of someone's job and gives you the chance to be paid back.

**Write reminders.** When writing an email use 1st request, 2nd request, 3rd request but remain polite and professional.

**Escalate the problem to SME's boss.** Check whether you have the same boss. Print emails and invitation proposals and have a talk with SME's manager. However, this path may be not that nice. Nevertheless, still stay polite.

**Write anything.** Try to write a draft of your work the way you understand it. Don't worry if it's dummy or inadequate. Once you send it for correction there may be a lot of revisors. It's a bit risky so be careful with that method!

Have in mind that you need to be flexible and match the situation to the method. It isn't good to escalate the problem to your supervisors as you are part of the team so spoiling the work atmosphere may not be a good solution. Everyone likes his job be done so just try to meet for an honest talk about achieving the project's main goal.

Perhaps you have different ways of dealing with an unresponsive SME? Please share your ideas, I'll be happy to read.