

Going Solo

By Nancy Gacki

It's tough going it alone in the business world. Once you've left your employer behind, the support you took for granted for all of those day-to-day business problems is gone. Each question that arises without a quick answer can derail you, affecting your productivity and your bottom line.

Where do you turn and what do you do? You need to learn to become independent and help yourself, but how? You will find that even though you are out on your own, there are plenty of resources. Here's a sampling.

Professional associations. Join a professional association. The monthly meetings can provide valuable information, networking, and support. Many publish a newsletter or magazine with industry information, event calendars, new product reviews, and work tips. Many associations also publish online.

To locate an association that's right for you, ask friends, co-workers, and associates. Many people who belong to one association will know about others. Some associations publish the meeting notices of related organizations. Check your local newspaper; many associations publish their event information in the business or community sections. Trade magazines often advertise professional organizations.

Many associations offer such members-only benefits as health and disability insurance; discounts at bookstores, computer stores, trade shows, and conferences; and access to valuable information through members-only sections of Websites. Some associations have special-interest groups devoted to a specific product, discipline, or topic. Many have directories in which you can advertise your services and locate others.

To get the best value for your membership dollar, choose your professional association wisely. Attend several meetings to get to know the association, its purpose, and the attendees. Then, determine whether it's a good fit with your needs. Get a schedule of the upcoming topics for meetings and ask yourself how many you'd attend. Review the membership benefits. If you think you'll attend a lot of the meetings and use most of the benefits, then it's worthwhile to join. If

not, it might be more cost-effective to attend only the meetings that interest you and pay the entry fee each time.

When attending such events, make an effort to meet people, get to know them, and find useful contacts. Stay in touch. Your contacts can serve as a valuable resource to answer questions and help with problems. They're also good sources of referrals for such things as computer repairs and software purchases.

There are associations and other organizations for trainers in specific disciplines, independent consultants, alumni, and so forth. If you can't find a suitable local group, you can join a national or international association to receive its publications; that can help keep you in touch with other professionals and industry news. Many have Websites and listservs,

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in which remote members can access information and communicate. Many associations offer videos of their meetings, even online, so you can see and hear the proceedings as if you were there.

Associations are also a good source of job leads; most have some sort of job-search service for members. Many maintain resume databases to match potential employees with open positions, though there may be a fee to participate. Typically, job openings are posted or announced at meetings. Leave your business card with everyone you talk to at such events. You never know who will call, so always be prepared to deliver a two-minute description of your qualifications and desired work.

Computer groups. As an independent consultant, you'll find yourself having to deal with inevitable PC problems. To avoid paying big bucks and being at the mercy of a repair person's availability, learn how to maintain, install, and debug your own software and hardware. Keep up with new product information. To make contacts you can rely on in a crunch, join a group for computer users. There are groups for general users, special-interest

users, and users of a specific hardware or software. The members range from novice to experienced. Many are independent consultants helping each other.

Typically, such groups hold monthly meetings. There's usually a Q&A period. Have your questions ready. Learn who's knowledgeable about what, and get contact information for your resource file. Many groups list in their newsletters members willing to answer questions in a specific subject area, such as Windows NT or QuarkXpress. Many groups hold small local conferences and inexpensive classes. Conferences and trade shows. Exhibit or speak at conferences and trade shows to promote your business. Such events are also a great resource for information, products, tutorials, and networking. Local conferences are often free. Talk to people, pick up free product samples, sign up for complimentary subscriptions, get information on listservs, and exchange business cards.

Once you attend one conference, you're likely to receive notices about others. Even if you can't attend, register regularly for shows just to stay on the mailing lists. It's an easy way for a large number of exhibitors, vendors, and potential clients to learn about you.

Try to attend shows on a press pass. Each sponsoring organization has different criteria to qualify. In many cases, you must have had articles or reviews published recently; bring copies when you register. As a member of the press, you'll be invited to events, and you'll receive advance notices and product samples and information. Having to speak or write about what you learned at a conference isn't a bad price to pay and will help get you and your business known.

Printed material. There's so much literature that it's hard to know which meets your needs and is of good quality. You have limited time to investigate, but you can always settle in at a bookstore for an afternoon and peruse the selections; many bookstores now have reading areas and don't mind people lingering. Take along a notepad and a list of topics you want to research.

To scan quickly, look at a book's introduction and conclusion. Check the references to other books on the same topic and URLs. See whether the author

has an email address; he or she might be able to give you the names of listservs, professional groups, and other resources.

If you're tackling a new subject, see whether your local college or university has any courses, and check out the recommended reading at the school's bookstore. Some textbooks are a compilation of recent articles.

Check online retrieval databases, indexes, or archives at the university and public libraries. Complement your efforts with an Internet search. Most magazines now have online versions, and many more exist solely on the Web.

Resources via the Internet. Most public libraries have computers and printers for public use. Often, Internet access is free. Learn how to surf the Net like a pro. Organizations such as the Society for Technical Communication and the National Writers' Union conduct workshops on using the Internet for research. Private businesses, such as copy centers and computer cafes, will let you rent computer time and instruction; many have excellent desktop publishing capability.

To find almost any organization's Website, enter this URL address: [www.\(nameoftheorganization\).org](http://www.(nameoftheorganization).org). That should work. Not-for-profit organization Websites end in *org*; companies end in *com*; educational institutions end in *edu*; and government agencies end in *gov*. Or you can try a search engine, such as AltaVista, Yahoo!, InfoSeek, or Excite. Type the keywords, and the search engine will list what it finds posted on the Web containing those words.

Many professional organizations, industry groups, and user groups have listservs or discussion groups. All subscribers (new contacts for you across the globe) receive all email messages posted to the listserv. Items about new product features, enhancements, and breakthroughs often appear first.

The Internet is also a good source of job listings. Most major newspapers now publish their employment sections online; you can search by job title, city, and so forth. Other sites let you post your resume, but use caution when divulging personal information; investigate their privacy policies first.

Telecommunications. A lot of useful information can be found in the telephone directory, especially the Yellow Pages. To check out your competition, search headings for suppliers. Many phone companies

now offer a Yellow Pages Website and will link your ad to your own Website. Some will help you design and post a new site. Many phone companies have a small-business services representative to advise you on how to grow your business using your phone. He or she can help you determine what type of equipment and services your business needs and alert you to the latest offerings.

Community and government resources. Civic groups and community organizations, such as the local Chamber of Commerce, can help you develop your business. The Chamber of Commerce promotes member businesses and represents their concerns to the community at large. The local chamber may have a small-business council focusing solely on developing small, entrepreneurial enterprises. Look for networking meetings featuring speakers on business issues. Many chambers also have or can refer you to a small-business development center run by the Small Business Administration.

The federal government and many state governments hold small-business tax workshops. Business "incubators," sponsored by universities and local governments, help new businesses gain a foothold by enabling them to pool and share such resources as office space and services. They also provide guidance and expertise to their members.

Training opportunities. To learn how to use new software, look for training at local high schools, junior colleges, or community colleges. Many offer inexpensive, seminar-type programs and free or inexpensive computer lab time.

Return to the public library; many offer workshops and training materials, such as videos or disks that you can check out just like books. See what local computer stores offer; many have training divisions with low-cost classes on popular software.

Remember: You may be on your own, but you're not alone.

Nancy Gacki is the owner of Gacki Technical Communication in Chicago, a firm that specializes in information design and delivery in WWW, electronic, and print media. Contact her at 773.927.3757; nhgacki@concentric.net.