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You have long years of experience in the IT field and you really know your stuff. But when you go to conferences or offer to speak to local user groups, nobody knows your name and you can't command the high consulting rates the IT superstars are bringing in. How do you establish yourself as an expert in this industry and build a reputation outside your own organization? It requires a lot more than just being good at your job. Here are 10 things you can do to get yourself recognized as one of the IT elite.

1: Gain experience

Even though IT experience isn't enough to get you recognized as an expert in an industry that's filled with experienced IT pros, it *is* the first prerequisite. No matter how brilliant you are, regardless of the fact that you were building your own circuit boards as a kid and made straight A's in comp sci, real-world experience still counts. You probably won't begin to be taken seriously until you've been working in the real world in some capacity for at least five years (10 is better).

The good news is that the form your experience takes can be flexible. It can be gained through working in the corporate environment, doing IT work in the military or for a governmental entity, running your own IT-related business, consulting, etc.

If you're a midlife career changer (as both my husband and I were), you can even leverage your experience in a different field to help build your reputation in IT. As a former law enforcement officer, I had "instant credibility" in the areas of security and cybercrime. Tom, an M.D., was able to speak more authoritatively on IT subjects related to medicine and health care, such as HIPAA compliance, than someone without that background. And that brings us to the next tip.

2: Concentrate on a specialty

The IT field has grown to the point where, as with the medical field, it's impossible for one person to master all of it. If you try to be a jack of all trades, you'll probably never become enough of an expert in anything to stand out from the crowd. Sure, it's possible to be an IT generalist, but the quickest route to "fame" (and some measure of fortune) is to find yourself a niche.

When Tom and I started to build our reputations in IT, we began by specializing in Microsoft's ISA Server, later branching out to firewall technology in general and then to the broader field of computer and network security.

You can focus on a particular product as we did, on a brand (such as becoming an expert in Microsoft technologies or Cisco technologies), on a branch of IT, such as security or network interoperability or mobile computing, or on a subfield, such as cryptography or computer forensics or scripting. The key is to pick something that really interests you, something you can get enthusiastic about -- because enthusiasm about your area of expertise is what others pick up on and it's what sets the top "experts" apart from others who know just as much (or sometimes more) but to whom it's all "just a job." The second important factor in choosing a specialty is to pick one where there is currently no one established expert. That leads into our next tip.

3: Take ownership

Once you've decided on an area of expertise, your goal should be to take ownership of that particular product or topic area. You want to become *the* person whom everyone thinks of when they think about that topic. You

want your name to be inextricably associated with SSL VPNs or VoIP security or whatever you've chosen as your specialty area.

If you don't like being locked into such a narrow area, don't worry. Remember that this is advice for *becoming* recognized in the field. After you've accomplished that, you can branch out to other technologies. For years, Tom was known as "Mr. ISA Server." Then ISA became a part of Microsoft's Forefront family and he became known for his knowledge of Unified Access Gateway (UAG), as well as ISA's successor, the Threat Management Gateway (TMG). That led to expertise in DirectAccess, which is part of UAG but also part of Windows Server 2008 R2, and so forth.

4: Start small

No matter how ambitious your ultimate goal is, you're more likely to attain it if you're willing to start small and get there in increments. Begin by becoming well known and respected in one particular venue -- such as on a particular Web forum or within a local IT user group. Hone your leadership skills and become a big fish in these small ponds, and that will lead to opportunities to swim in much bigger waters.

When Tom and I started our IT consulting business back in the 90s, we began building relationships with local businesses. But at the same time, we became extremely active on a few of the biggest IT newsgroups and mailing lists. We posted frequently to those groups and attempted to answer as many of the other group members' questions as we could. Sometimes that meant extensive research, but it quickly got us both recognized as "helpers" -- people who had some knowledge about IT and were willing to share it to help others.

What we didn't know at the time was that publishers of IT books lurked on those mailing lists, looking for potential authors. Because we demonstrated knowledge of IT in our posts and because we were articulate in expressing ourselves, Tom was soon contacted by Syngress Publishing and I was contacted by Cisco Press with offers of contracts to write books. And writing a book on a subject is one of the very best ways to become recognized as an expert.

5: Take on writing assignments

Not everyone has the time, interest, and stamina to write a book. It's a lot of hard work. Sometimes it pays off handsomely but other times the earnings, given the hours you put in, don't even add up to minimum wage. An easier way to make money writing about IT is to produce 500- to 2,500-word articles for IT webzines. Leverage the reputation you've built on forums and the relationships you've formed there to catch the attention of editors. Pitch a query, and when you get your first assignment, put your all into the article. In the beginning, don't worry too much about the compensation -- even consider doing a freebie or two to prove yourself and show the editor that you reliably produce accurate, well-written, on-time contributions. (Don't continue to write for free, though, if you really want to be considered an expert. People intuitively know you usually get what you pay for, and those who are good at what they do rarely give it away without some special reason.)

6: Put your name on the Web

Even if you haven't yet reached the point where people are willing to pay you to write about IT, you can get your name out there: Put it on the Web. Create an IT-oriented Web site with your name prominently featured. It can be a help forum, where you answer questions and solve IT problems. It can be a gathering place for other IT pros to post on a Web board and do much of the problem solving. It can be just an ad for your consulting business or a showplace for you to brag about your awards (if you do it in the right way). The important thing is to get your name "up in lights."

Your own Web site is just a start, though. You want a Web search on your name to return thousands of hits, and you want them to be connected to the "best" IT related Web sites. So get out there and post on other sites, exchange links with other IT folks, grant interviews to IT journalists, and get yourself known.

A blog is a great way to develop a following in the IT world. There, you can post articles about IT topics that are too short or not polished enough to market to the paying IT webzines or that cover things their editors aren't interested in publishing. You can also get more "folksy" in blog posts and develop a more intimate relationship with readers than you can do on some of the more formal IT sites. And you don't have to worry about anyone editing out the best part of your piece. Just remember to keep it professional and tech related. Set up a separate blog if you want to also blog about your personal life and non-tech-related interests.

7: Get social

Don't get so busy building your business that you forget the importance of socializing. That includes both real-world and online social networking. Join LinkedIn and Facebook and set up a Twitter account, and use them to further your career ambitions. Seek out other IT pros as friends and followers and post with your business reputation in mind. Post tidbits of IT news, links to helpful IT articles, and of course, links to any of your articles, blog posts, etc. As with blogging, if you want to use social networking sites for more personal purposes, set up two separate accounts -- one for business friends and one for personal friends.

IT conferences present another good opportunity to socialize and make contacts in the field and to meet and greet other members of the IT community.

8: Get out and about

The beautiful thing about the Internet is that "nobody knows you're a dog." Looks, race, gender, disabilities, etc., don't matter. It is entirely possible to build a strong reputation and make a good living doing everything online. For several years, Tom and I made good incomes writing books, articles, and whitepapers without ever meeting, in person, any of the people we were working for. Some of them we never even talked to on the phone.

However, if you want to take your career to the next level, it pays to get to know your colleagues and "bosses" in person. There's a good chance that after you've been working with them for a while, they'll initiate the in-person meeting themselves (and pay for it). But if not, you can forge a stronger bond that may result in more favorable contract negotiations, better assignments, and so on, by taking a little trip to their locations and dropping by while you're there. Or attend tech conferences you know they'll be attending and get together there. Sure, it might cost you a little money (although you should recoup some of it from the tax write-off), but it's likely to more than pay for itself in future work.

9: Seek out other superstars

When you're socializing, whether online or at real-world events, hang out with the other superstars if you can. I don't mean you should push your way into the inner circle, but you shouldn't be shy about approaching the IT gurus you admire and letting them know how they've inspired you. Especially as you begin to be known for your own expertise, most of them will be happy to be contacted by you. Email is nonintrusive and a good way to introduce yourself. Look for commonalities: Did you both grow up in the same state or go to the same college? Do you have the same breed of dog? Are you both musicians? Support the same political candidates? Common ground makes a good basis for conversation. Who knows? Maybe you'll become good friends with someone you once considered way above you. One day he/she might even be writing to you, asking for your help in getting work. That's happened to me more than once.

While you're making a place for yourself among the superstars, though, don't ignore the "little people." Remember that it's your readers and "fans" who make you a star, not the other stars. When you attend a conference, go out of your way to spend time with those who have questions for you. If someone asks you to autograph a copy of your book, you should feel just as honored as you did the first time it happened. Even if you've "arrived," stay humble. Your career path went up, but it can also go down. And others' balloons may rise in the meantime. Be nice to everybody. You never know when today's "nobody" might be in the position to hire you in the future.

10: Talk the talk

Writing will get you name recognition, but to get face recognition, you need to do more. Real-life meetings and conferences will do that, to a degree. But if you really want to be a superstar, you shouldn't be just *attending* those conferences; you should be presenting at them. They say public speaking is the number one fear, even above death -- but it's a fear that anyone can get over with a lot of practice. When I was in high school, I was super shy and literally trembled and got sick to my stomach at the idea of standing up and talking in front of an audience. A wise counselor forced me into the speech and debate class, and what started as agony ended up being a huge source of self-confidence and something that shaped my life. After that, I went on to become a police officer, police academy instructor, college criminal justice instructor, and later an IT trainer and speaker at various events.

You can start by speaking at local user group meetings or volunteering to teach a class in computer usage for your library, city community center, or community college. With speaking experience under your belt, start submitting presentation proposals for larger events, such as TechEd, BlackHat, or the whatever regional, national, or international conferences focus on your area of expertise. If you've published articles or books on the topic, that gives you more credibility as a speaker.

When you're standing up in front of a room full of IT pros at one of the well-known industry events, you'll know that your plan to become an IT superstar is working.