

## A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A PERSONAL NETWORK

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### ABSTRACT

A whirlwind courtship has as its centerpiece, typically, good food, music, and drink. This potent combination fosters the birth of a new being on occasion, and did so for us. The gestation was short (3 days), and the birth was wholly natural. Our baby, ViCS (Virtual Consulting Staff), hit the Internet full stride for the first time on Thursday, November 11, 1993, at 2:54:57 PM, Central Standard Time.

The first six months of ViCS' life would be telling. It is during this period that emotions, egos, and personalities surface. Could we garner and maintain control over ViCS' potential Sybil-like tendencies? Would our collective personality begin to fragment over time? We clicked in person, could ViCS click electronically?

During the first day of ViCS' life, we exchanged electronic thank you's and E-mail addresses. ViCS' second day of life revolved around determining our focus, with the intent of celebrating ViCS' first birthday with a panel presentation in Ypsilanti. The excitement of the San Diego SIGUCCS conference was still within. By the time Thanksgiving came upon us, ViCS was fewer than three weeks old and already a powerful presence in our lives. ViCS had become our forum for computing viruses, weather, birth dates, snail mail addresses, family recipes and traditions. It was also at this time that ViCS suffered its first loss—we discovered with great sadness, that a member of our group would be leaving us.

In the first six months of life, ViCS has taught us that distance is but a baby step on the Internet, and that friendship, support, love, and trust can leap the greatest of barriers.

### THE SOURCE

As soon as John got back to Eau Claire, he wrote to Martie about collaborating on a paper for next year's conference. He suggested that they "follow the personal networking that goes on among 'the infamous Dick's 8' .... We can use it to demonstrate the long-term advantages of free-time networking at SIGUCCS meetings." Martie responded that she and Judy had already outlined a similar paper on the flight home to Greensboro. We were already

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clicking. You know what they say about great minds—apparently the same can be said about not so great minds. Martie and Judy had also decided that rather than presenting a paper, we should prepare to give a panel discussion(1). Such was our beginning. We formed a list of E-Mail addresses collected at SIGUCCS and sent mail.

Responses found their way across the wires and thus, the personal network from SIGUCCS 1993 was born. The network has been alive and well since that time. We have exchanged almost 500 mail messages among the entire personal network, with more than 90 from June 1 to June 13 while working on the papers and continuing to read and respond to the wisdom of each! We have also exchanged many one-to-one messages.

### **SUBJECTS OF MAIL MESSAGES**

The topics of the mail messages have been quite varied. Some of the subjects extracted from the mail headers, in chronological order are: "Thanks from me also!," "Next Year's Paper," "How we met," "Monkey virus," "Expertise," "Giving Thanks for Friends," "Apple Computer," "Crime and Insanity," "Is there a Santa Claus," "Policy Doc," "Job Announcement," "Final Call for SIGUCCS 94 Papers," "the paper vs papers," "reactions," "Testing PMDF," "Outline".

From this sampling of the electronic mail subjects, you can see that the personal network participants exchanged information on many topics ranging from thank yous to testing mailing systems and preparing for SIGUCCS 1994. It is interesting that as soon as the basic Thank Yous were completed "Next Year's (SIGUCCS) Paper" was one of the very first topics. Martie and Judy had outlined a paper over Texas on the back of the hotel confirmation. By November 12, Martie had come up with the idea of a panel and started a discussion of how this might occur.

### **HOW WE MET OR TRUE CONFESSIONS**

On 15-NOV-1993 17:57:15.50 we began the real preparation for SIGUCCS 94 by reviewing how we met at SIGUCCS 93 (we realize that this portion of our paper could be useful to SIGUCCS planners and to planners of other conferences, as well as, to individuals attending conferences!).

John, from University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, met Robert and Don, from Willamette University in Oregon at breakfast Sunday morning. John was going to the zoo, Robert and Don were signed up for a tutorial.

Sunday night At the Wear-Your-University-Sweatshirt Reception, Cynthia met Martie, Judy and Marlene in the food line. It was taking so long to get food, that Judy and Martie started making excursions to the bar while Marlene, who did not need to add calories, but who always likes to talk saved their places in line. While holding places, Marlene saw Cynthia's sweatshirt from Carnegie-Mellon, as Cynthia was observing and trying to figure out what Judy and Martie were really doing! Since Marlene had visited

CMU several times, she started talking to Cynthia. After waiting much too long to get to the eats, Judy and Martie discovered (by attempting to cut in further up the line) that we had all been waiting in the dessert line. Arrgh! We shifted our group of four to the appropriate spot, got some real food, and found a place where we could balance our dishes and snacked together.

At that same event, Martie, who had lived in Oregon, noticed Don's Willamette sweatshirt and literally ran up to him and grabbed his sleeve. She was so happy to see a living person from Oregon. She introduced herself, Judy, and Marlene, all from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro to Don. Robert, seeing that males from Oregon could be very popular at SIGUCCS, soon joined the crowd.

Later Sunday night in the Hospitality Suite, Robert and Don introduced John to Judy, Martie, and Marlene. We made plans to go out Monday night. "We'll meet in the hotel lounge."

Sara, also from Willamette, arrived late on Sunday and joined Robert Don, John, Martie, and Judy at the conference luncheon on Monday. She was invited to go out with us later that evening.

We met in the hotel lounge as planned, ran into some other folks that we knew, and invited them to join us. We all set off in search of food. We found a great place to eat and lots of good music to enjoy. About half the group left after dinner; it was the ViCS that decided music and talk were more important than sleep!

On Tuesday, we expanded again. Andrea, who attended Martie and Judy's presentation saw them waiting in the bar as we were grouping again for dinner. She walked up to talk and was invited to join the group for dinner. The last day of the conference we met for muffins and juice. Before everyone had to leave for the airport, we had one last San Diego lunch.

We found the sweatshirts that identified us geographically were really a very useful way to break ice and to begin our Virtual Consulting Staff or Personal Network. We found the Hospitality Suite a good place to meet and the food events a great chance to talk some more.

After the initial work on the panel for SIGUCCS 94, our mail exchanges were about ourselves at work and at home.

### **FAMILY TRADITIONS**

All of us learned about family traditions for Thanksgiving and Christmas in various parts of the country and in our various families. For Thanksgiving we exchanged menus of our traditional foods. Not all of us concentrate on turkey and the trimmings. Andrea share a recipe for artichokes (2). Judy creates a fun and exciting Christmas season, filled with the magic of the season, for her two year old son Cynthia reads and plays games with her nephews. Robert goes to fantastic family food feasts.

## WEATHER AND PERSONALITIES

We know how cold it was in Wisconsin last winter; we know that North Carolina had ice rain; we know that it poured in Pittsburgh. John told us how hardy people in Wisconsin are when we whimpered about a few cold, rainy days in North Carolina. He painted us a verbal picture of a brilliant, snowy winter day and explained how he prepares to go out into the sparkling air. Judy told everyone what happens when snowy weather is predicted in North Carolina: a run is made on the grocery stores and people stock up on milk, bread, and toilet paper. We found out that people in Pittsburgh do the same thing. We heard the snow crunch in Pittsburgh when Cynthia described it to us. Reading how people think about and describe their environments helped us to see our own in different lights and each other in different temperatures. These weather reports were so more meaningful than the glimpse we get on the nightly TV news or the weather channel.

## AQUATIC ADVENTURES

We followed the adventures of Cynthia as she fought water, in her house and in white water rivers. Cynthia received sympathy from all of us when she woke to a basement flooded by a broken hot water tank. Her chilly shower in the middle of winter put the rest of our complaints into perspective (at least for that day!). She received admiring remarks when she told us of her class III whitewater canoeing adventures.

## BOOKS

Our group of seven people span the continent from the southeast to the northwest with stops in between. At least two of us, Cynthia and Marlene are avid readers and we made arrangements in the San Diego airport to exchange book reviews. Marlene belongs to a book group and periodically reflects on Southern and other authors her book group reads. Cynthia reads between her classes and on vacations and sends reports. A book both readers recommend is *Walking Across Egypt* by Clyde Edgerton. This is light, humorous, but meaningful fiction recommended by two people who read Jorge Borges, Umberto Eco, and Italo Calvino.

## FUNNY

All of us appreciate funny incidents, personal and public. As many who earn their livelihoods working with both people and computers we enjoy humorous stories that use computer analogies, jargon, or personality types. We exchanged the best of the humor bubbling its way around the Internet or at least what any of us thought good enough for our personal network to share.

We probably generated one of the fastest round of congratulations in the known world when Andrea announced her second child is due in December. The announcement inspired Cynthia to share children's thoughts on love. A nine year old concerned with the origins of love said, "Cupid kissed God and that got the ball rollin'." Another nine year old does not know why love happens

between two people, "but I heard it has something to do with how you smell ... That's why perfume and deodorant are so popular." Recognizing that we all love our local systems programmers and that we cannot get along without them, one seven year old reminded us of how some systems programmers might feel about love, "If falling in love is anything like learning how to spell, I don't want to do it. It takes too long."

We generated much of our own humor, frequently in response to something from the Internet. We even shared one of our humorous exchanges concerning lawn mowers and leaves with a biologist at UNCG and thus, spread good cheer beyond our personal network (3).

We all enjoyed and marveled at the creative ASCII graphics of Robert. What a guitar symbol (4)! We basically learned more about each other and a little more of what it is like to work at a different college or university.

## COMPUTER VIRUSES

Unfortunately we had to exchange information on computer viruses. The first person to spot a significant announcement on the Internet shared it with the others. Several people filtering information meant less work for all. Anyone who belongs to several lists discussing a variety of topics knows how many repetitious announcements there are. Of course, the posters have all of our best interests at heart. They want to warn us about viruses and frequently about legislation. On any given busy day though, it becomes almost impossible to filter out the duplicates and keep up with the important information. The personal network is a major assistance in acting as a coast to coast filter.

## HOW DO YOU SPEAK SAS?

John, Judy, and Martie shared problems and solutions concerning the use of SPSS. John had a set of SPSS statements that he needed transformed into SAS, which Judy did for him. This took some time and was a good exercise, but not something she would do, generally, if this were a general request out on the Internet. Seeing equivalent statements in two statistic packages is useful for consultants and also for workshops consultants might teach.

## MACINTOSHES IN OUR ENVIRONMENTS

Andrea was having difficulty partitioning a Mac hard drive into two Mac partitions. Apple's HD SC Setup allows multiple partitions, but not like partitions (i.e. the partitions can be different such as one partition as Mac and the other as A/UX). She knew that utilities such as System Switcher or System Picker would allow two Systems to supposedly coexist peacefully on one drive, but her user did not want to risk System corruption (he had a very peculiar setup). Cynthia and John both queried their Mac "Pooh Bahs," and, within 3 hours, each had sent Andrea confirmation that System Switcher/Picker was the most stable route to pursue. She was able to get her "peculiar" user up and running on System Switcher that afternoon (she still hasn't received an answer from her Apple Rep!)

## **BEING A RESEARCH SUBJECT**

John assisted Marlene in a research project using a conferencing system as a contrast to listservs for the exchange of information among colleagues. The results of the project were reported at a round table discussion at the American Educational Research Association meetings in New Orleans.

## **WHY NOT GO OUT ON THE NET**

Before we get into other examples of sharing, it is time to recall why we could just not get the same information by "going out on the net." A listserv or newsgroup does exist for just about any topic we have mentioned. Veronica and other Internet research tools are frequently helpful in finding information. However, by restricting our questions to a few persons we know instead of many we do not know, and not using searches we saved reading hundreds of repetitive solutions to one problem or reading material that is irrelevant. Filters certainly exist to screen information, but having fewer persons to contact cut down on the extra work we had to do to get to the information we needed. Further when clarification was needed we only had to send mail to a few other people and it was clarified quickly. We certainly do not think consultants and others should give up all the options available for retrieving information on the Internet, but it is helpful to get to some information in a hurry using a personal network. The extended consulting staff is akin to local staff, except that the experiences are even more varied!

## **COMPUTING POLICY**

Martie, Judy and Marlene shared the computing policy at UNCG with Cynthia of Carnegie-Mellon, who then shared it with John in at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire. There are hundreds of policies stored on the Internet, but we don't know the people who wrote them. The people involved in the writing might not even be at the institution at this time and when it comes to questioning something in policy who takes ownership? How can you learn the politics surrounding the writing of the policy? What legal issues were raised? Were there culture clashes and were they resolved? Would you change the policy if you wrote it today? These are important issues that can not be resolved when extracting the policy statements on the net. The key to these kinds of things is to have a few contacts that you know so you can make a judgment about the policy.

## **UNSOLICITED MAIL**

Several of us discussed the problems of unsolicited mail received by persons on our campuses and how we go about resolving that problem. One of Cynthia's clients in Pittsburgh found himself on an offensive mailing list that he did not choose. Hearing about this case and knowing of several others on our own campuses, we shared information about people's reactions, feelings, legalities, and actions.

The UNCG computing policy specifically mentions electronic mail harassment and other potential mail abuses (5). The Instructional and Research Computing staff and

director have had to point out the policy several times to student offenders of the policy and have taken measures to see that unsolicited and undesired mail is not sent by people on our campus to other campus mail users. The unsolicited mail issue gave us further opportunity to discuss computing policies in a context where they are needed.

## **REGRESS FOR ME, PLEASE**

Robert needed an example of a regression problem for a faculty member on his campus. The example was provided by Martie in short order. We hope the faculty member in Oregon was impressed by such quick turn around.

## **PINE (MAIL, NOT TREE)**

Robert shared Willamette's documentation on Pine with Martie of UNCG. During Internet workshops Robert in Oregon was the lucky recipient of tens of E-Mail messages from people on North Carolina getting their first taste of how to send mail to an Internet address. The workshop attendees learned how quickly mail really can be delivered. Robert probably learned a few new "spellins".

## **HOW WE PUT THIS TOGETHER**

The final section of this paper concerns the fast and furious exchanges across the country to put together a panel and these papers. John, Martie, Judy, Cynthia and Marlene have written and delivered papers in San Diego or other places and we were confident our personal network could do a presentation at SIGUCCS 94.

First, we shared the call for participation. Then we discussed what to submit (remember that Martie and Judy had outlined one paper on the return flight last fall and days later Martie proposed a panel) and how to go about working up a presentation when we are so scattered and cannot possibly meet in person to do this. We have maintained this group via E-Mail since November so could we not now use this communication medium for creating a paper or a panel for SIGUCCS? We did come to consensus on the panel idea. We designated a leader, Robert, and fed him suggestions for the papers to be presented by the panel. Once the paper ideas were fixed, we worked on the abstracts and submitted them with the panel proposal.

We then had to decide who would do what and how it would be done. We concluded that all would be authors on all papers, but two or three would be the main authors on each of the three papers. The abstracts would be circulated through mail and all would have an opportunity to make suggestions, verify facts, and add text. This was all conducted via our personal network electronic mail distributions.

After the panel was accepted we started the discussion of how we would pull together the writing of these papers. This is a collegial problem several of the faculty members at our institutions face frequently so this is a really good opportunity for us to do what they do in a very real way. We do have a difference though. We have a small group and the

faculty usually have two or at most three people working on a paper. We passed around several options for working on the papers. One option was to have each person work on his or her assigned paper alone and when at a good point of sharing, send it out. If another writer, in the meantime, did work on the same paper, writer one would then extract the version of writer two and work on it, maybe incorporating his or her own paper into the extracted paper or, being inspired by someone else's work add paragraphs or thoughts going with the trends set forth in paper two.

Perhaps by this process the two or more papers would each be in a form suitable for submission and then we would just choose which to use. Another suggestion was to round robin the papers. One person works on a paper. Then instead of sending it to the whole group, send it to one person. Person two works on it and sends it to person three. This is an old form of sharing letters among a group of scattered friends.

Paper one was the first to be written and sent to all. The two main authors, Judy and Martie, have offices next door to each other so they were not restricted by electronic mail! The comments to paper one were all done with E-mail. Another option emerged for paper two. A detailed outline was started by John and then elaborated and commented upon by Cynthia and the rest of the personal network. The third paper was started by Marlene and sent to all early one morning! Andrea joined in with detailed threading of the topics discussed. Comments and additions to the papers were provided by all and incorporated by the major authors.

## SUMMARY

The personal network born after SIGUCCS 93 in San Diego grew faster than a baby and is well beyond the toddler age seven months after birth. It does help to start as an adult! We can discuss almost any topic that any of us bring up and someone among us is bound to have an answer or know where to get one to a problem faced at work. We are able to encourage each other when our colleagues close to us might be aggravating or unable to assist. The mental health of each of us has been buoyed by the humorous comments of others.

## END NOTES

(1) Excerpt from mail message written by Martie Skinner on November 12, 1993.

"Judy and I started next year's paper on the plane on the way home. We're not taking any chances on missing the next annual meeting of the San Diego 'personal network' (more on this below)..."

We've decided that our paper would make a great panel discussion instead of a straight (not that we are capable of straight) presentation. So we want to know if all of you will participate. Here's an outline of our idea.

TITLE: THE VIRTUAL CONSULTING STAFF; or Your Staff is only as big as the Internet

We are going to discuss 3 ways in which consultants can use the Internet to expand their capabilities. They are:

- 1) Join lists that focus on software, platforms, hardware, etc. This won't take much to cover since everyone probably does this or has tried it and decided they don't have time to read all that mail.
- 2) Search gopherspace for FAQ's and info services on other campuses. Again this is probably pretty wide spread and won't take much time to cover.
- 3) Develop a "personal Network" of colleagues around the world. This group can help solve problems and answer questions outside your own expertise. It should not be too large and it should be based on personal relationships. This is where most of the discussion will be.

Judy and I think this could be really useful. You make contacts with people at conferences and develop personal relationships. They become resources to call on when you need a little help on your own campus. The advantages over listserv is that the people you turn to with your questions are people you trust and whose expertise you have some knowledge of. (Sorry about ending in a preposition, but I'm winging it here.) They are motivated to give you the best help they can because they are your friends and care about your problems (within reason). They also want you to help them when they are stuck.

We can talk at some length about how one establishes such a group—and how someone is added later once the thing gets started. Pointing out that we are not talking about your generic "networking" strategy where you meet someone in the hall outside of a session and give them your E-mail address. We're talking about real relationships here, which take time and a lot of music to establish.

So, what do you think? We have 6 months to try it and see if it really does help expand our consulting capabilities. One measure of success should be if it gets us all trips to Michigan next Fall."

(2) Excerpt from mail message written by Andrea Mox on November 23, 1993 (see Figure 1).

(3) The first "leaves" message was sent to the personal network by Marlene and concerned a child's fear of lawnmowers and the attempt to find a book about lawnmowers. The message was posted first to the PUBYAC, a listserv for public librarians serving children and young adults and after that posted to a other listservs. The same child was scared of leaves and books about leaves had helped him to overcome his fear.

Robert Minato's RESPONSE:

"I find fear of lawnmowers to be a handy excuse for never mowing anyone's lawn. I stay comfortably away from all power tools which cut, hack, saw, or are otherwise capable of maiming living tissue, sipping a cold micro from a safe distance.

To be at one with a lawnmower is to be known as "Stump" or "Lefty".

(Excerpt from *Psychology Today*, May 1987, "Lateral Outgrowth Foliage and Behavioural Considerations": A. Petiole, Ph.D.,

Research has shown that the ensiform, lanceolate, and linear forms tend to be relatively docile, while the oblong, elliptic, oblanceolate, ovate, and cuneate forms are the most hostile. Chordates and reniforms will often incite violence in otherwise peaceful leaf assemblies, sometimes using captured needle forms as weapons, while any from the order Filicales will frequently have a soothing effect on agitated leaf assemblies. This phenomenon may have contributed to the development of the “fern bars” of the late 70s and early 80s. The ferns seemed to have a calming effect on the human patrons, resulting in fewer altercations and a preponderance of Barry Manilow records being played.\*

"Research has shown that the ensiform, lanceolate, and linear forms tend to be relatively docile, while the oblong, elliptic, oblanceolate, ovate, and cuneate forms are the most hostile.

Chordates and reniforms will often incite violence in otherwise peaceful leaf assemblies, sometimes using captured needle forms as weapons, Cordata (heart-shaped) and reniform (kidney-shaped) leaves, on the other hand, are usually soft and peaceful. They are hardly the types incite violence.

So, Robert's rebuttle to the botanist is worth reading. I think we

martie”

“Actually, L. missed the point ... the leaves tend to rove in packs, using the wind to carry them along. Sure, the heart- and kidney-shaped leaves are relatively harmless taken as individuals, but when thousands gather together and are swept along by the wind, mob mentality takes over, and, well, it's not a pretty picture. The sword-shaped leaves, tend to cut through the wind and are not so readily carried along by it. Also, they tend to be less influenced by peer pressure, once separated from their host plant stalk, and not so likely to join gangs. Some of this is surely do to a more stable family structure during their formative bud period, but all the research is not in on this topic.

Over and out ... r."

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3. To respect the rights of others; this includes a prohibition on:

- a. Use of the MAIL utility or any other facility to communicate threats, obscenities, annoying messages (junk mail), or suggestive remarks.
- b. Use of the MAIL utility or any other facility to communicate information with the intent to commit or to suggest a criminal act.

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4 Boxes Frozen Artichoke Hearts  
1 1/2 Cups Italian Bread Crumbs  
1/2 Cup Grated Parmesan Cheese  
1+ Cup oil (veggie or olive)  
Garlic Powder, Italian Spices  
to taste (at least a teaspoon of each)

Microwave artichokes until hot. Place artichokes in greased 9x13 pan. Mix bread crumbs, cheese and spices—generously cover the artichokes. Drizzle oil over bread crumbs, cook at 350 until bottoms

ACM SIGUCCS XXII