



# NACOP Newsletter

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## Message from the Co-Chairs

By: Veronica Laird, PWA  
Patricia Berry, HQ

The NACOP annual meeting was held July 18-20, 2006, in Fort Collins, CO, and was hosted by Northern Plains Area representative Cody Jensen. The meeting provided an opportunity to review the lessons learned from the National Conference for ARS Professionals held May 8-11, 2006, in St. Louis, MO, as well as to review the progress of ongoing Council projects and to set goals for 2007.

The Council welcomed the following new members at our annual meeting: Sandra Ball (NAL), Drusilla Fratesi (MSA), Barbara Hodges (SPA), Wendy Jacobs (BA), and Shelia Jackson (SAA). Due to a prolonged, unexpected absence, Shelia has been temporarily replaced by Wanda Rohrer with the Subtropical Horticulture Research Unit in Miami, FL. Due to relocation (outside of ARS), Cody Jensen has been permanently replaced by Sharon Peterson with the Grand Forks Human Nutrition Research Center in Grand Forks, ND. We offer our thanks to Wanda and Sharon for their enthusiasm and willingness to step in with very little notice.

One of our projects is to update our Resource Assistance List. This is a list that provides contact information for volunteers (across ARS) with expertise in a variety of key areas (ARIS, CATS, ARMPS, Travel (both foreign and domestic), Correspondence, etc.). ARS has rolled out several new systems in the past few years, and we have a need for volunteers who are knowledgeable in these newer areas (IAS, CATS, etc.). If you would like to offer your services as a resource in any area,

please send e-mail to Co-Chairs Veronica ([vlaird@pw.ars.usda.gov](mailto:vlaird@pw.ars.usda.gov)) or Pat ([patricia.berry@ars.usda.gov](mailto:patricia.berry@ars.usda.gov)).

As the 2006-2007 NACOP Co-Chairs, Pat Berry and I are very excited to work on the goals developed for 2007.



## Free business presentation tips

ASK COLLEAGUES if they enjoy public speaking and most will tell you it's not high on their list of favorite things to do. Despite these feelings, how you present your ideas to an audience can sometimes make the difference between more or less opportunity and success in your career. Free resources are available to help you improve your presentation skills from Better Business Presentations (BBP), a company that offers coaching services in business communications. The BBP Web site offers a number of useful tools and articles, such as a presentation checklist, how to understand different audiences, making different types of presentations and much more! Visit [betterbusinesspresentations.com](http://betterbusinesspresentations.com) for great tips on becoming a polished and professional presenter.



## PEAK PERFORMANCE

### Procrastination inoculation

YOU KNOW WHAT you need to do. You know why you need to do it. You even know what steps you must take to get it done. But there's one small problem: you can't seem to get moving. It's a common problem. Maybe it's chronic procrastination or maybe you're just so overwhelmed that you feel paralyzed. Either way, the task you must complete is just sitting there, gathering metaphorical (or perhaps literal) dust, and growing more ominous by the day.

You can motivate yourself to do what needs doing, according to Karen Leiland and Keith Bailey, authors of *Watercooler Wisdom: How Smart People Prosper in the Face of Conflict, Pressure and Change* (New Harbinger Publications, 2006). Leiland and Bailey have spent two decades studying what makes some workers so productive and have discovered that smart people use three habits to get themselves to take action, even in tough times. These habits act as an inoculation against procrastination. Here are the three "Habits of Action," excerpted from *Watercooler Wisdom*.

**Habit #1: Chunking down: Focus on the trees, not the forest.** Chunking your projects and goals down into smaller pieces will help you take action more quickly and easily. If your goal is to publish a book, for instance, you might break your process down into milestones (1. Write the book proposal; 2. Submit it to agents; 3. Follow up with agents; 4. Sign with an agent) and then into "micro milestones" (1. Write a two-page overview of the book; 2. Write a one-page author's biography; 3. Research on Amazon to find similar books already in print and so forth). The point of micro-milestones is to create steps small enough that they seem doable, physically, mentally and emotionally. This motivates you to take action.

**Habit #2. Take energetic credit for completion.** Often, even though we're achieving pieces of our projects and goals all the time, we don't fully acknowledge them. Smart people know not to wait until the big item is 100 percent done before experiencing closure. They are in the habit of enthusiastically taking credit for any action they complete, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant, and generate energy all along the way by recognizing each item they complete.

**Habit #3: Time-planning: Put a stop to putting it off.** Smart people are in the habit of using a time-plan to get beyond procrastination. A time-plan is a method of assigning blocks of time to those items you want to get done. To create your own time-plan, identify **your** power times for different types of activities. Everyone has high and low periods of energy, attention and focus. Use your power times to take on your most difficult items. Use your downtime for more routine items and errands.

Set aside blocks of time for getting certain things done. Keeping in mind your power times, go through your calendar and schedule a specific day and period of time when you will work on an item. Every hour or so, schedule a ten-minute break from your task. Don't just plan your time in your head—write it down! Keeping a record of your time-plan is key.

*This article was excerpted with permission from Watercooler Wisdom: How Smart People Prosper in the Face of Conflict, Pressure and Change by Karen Leiland and Keith Bailey, co-founders of Sterling Consulting Group, Inc., an international management consulting firm. For more information, contact them at [leiland@scgtraining.com](mailto:leiland@scgtraining.com) or call (415) 260-4615.*

### Avoiding interview mistakes

YOU'VE APPLIED for a promotion and have all the necessary qualifications but still have to face the dreaded job interview. It's not enough to look good on paper when applying for jobs today; you also have to make a good impression in person, says career coach and resume writer, Deborah Walker, in a recent article in *OfficePro* magazine. According to Walker, some of the most common interview mistakes include:

- Being unprepared for difficult interview questions. Take the time to anticipate the toughest questions you might be asked, and prepare your answers in advance.
- Talking too much. Feeling nervous may cause you to ramble on when answering questions. Rehearse your responses to questions so that you can practice being succinct.
- Criticizing former employers or colleagues. No matter how bad the situation was (or is), look for ways to put a positive spin on it. For example, instead of saying, "My previous manager refused to give me any opportunities to learn new skills," say, "I left that job because I felt I was ready to take on a new challenge."



### Projecting professional self-worth

IT'S LIKELY THAT your workplace contribution isn't just "pretty good," it's probably *great*. The trouble is, many people feel that it's arrogant to trumpet their own contribution—that it's all right if another does it for you, but it's not all right to do it for yourself, says Nina Spencer, author of *Getting Passion Out of Your Profession: How to keep loving your living... come what may* (Transcontinental Metrolitho Book Group, 2006).

Now is the time to acknowledge what you bring to the professional table, says Spencer. Your organization needs you, now more than ever, to declare your professional qualities, knowledge, skills and abilities. No more hiding your professional light under a bushel. Remind yourself of your valuable contribution by responding to these questions:

1. *What professional abilities and gifts come easily to me?*
2. *What professional skills do I demonstrate better than most people?*
3. *How have I grown professionally over the past year?*

4. *What's the most important professional lesson I learned in 2005, and how am I applying that wisdom now, in 2006?*
5. *What are the most difficult things I've accomplished in my current position?*
6. *Of what workplace accomplishment am I most proud?*
7. *When it comes to my professional contribution, about what would I most like to receive compliments?*

Answering these questions will remind you of your important workplace contributions and may help you through some challenging times. At the very most, this exercise may make a measurable difference in your daily performance. At the very least, when you're feeling unappreciated, reading your responses to these questions may be just the medicine for regaining pride in your contribution.

Your contribution is important to your employer's success. If it wasn't, you'd already be gone. Remember that the next time you're unsure of how your contribution fits into the organization's big picture. It may also help to keep in mind these inspiring words from Martin Luther King, Jr. "If a man is a street sweeper, he should sweep the streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well."

Keep on "sweeping"!



*Nina Spencer is a motivational speaker, workshop facilitator and author of the new book, Getting Passion Out of Your Profession. To book Nina's keynote or workshop services, or to order your own copy of Getting Passion Out of Your Profession, visit [ninaspencer.com](http://ninaspencer.com) or call (416) 588-3334.*



## CYBER ASSISTANT

### Learning languages online

AS THE BUSINESS world becomes more global, many office workers are required to communicate more frequently with people in other countries. With increased frequency, companies are looking for employees who speak languages other than English. Becoming fluent in another language can take a great deal of time and practice, but the Internet makes it easy to learn some basics in just about any language you choose. Best of all, many online language lessons are available free of charge.

If you'd like to learn a new language to add to your resume, start by visiting the Word2Word Web site ([word2word.com/course.html](http://word2word.com/course.html)), which has links to free lessons for many common languages such as Spanish and French as well as unusual languages such as Abenaki. This Web site offers multiple links for some of the more common languages, so you have a nice assortment of online courses to choose from.

Another good site to check out is [iLoveLanguages.com](http://iLoveLanguages.com), which also offers a comprehensive listing of online language courses, with multiple links to resources for each language listed. This Web site also has links to language dictionaries, free translation services and even a language identification feature if you're trying to determine in what language something is written. Most of the Web site links listed on Word2Word and [iLoveLanguages.com](http://iLoveLanguages.com) don't require any registration, so you can pick and choose the lessons you want without making any commitment or divulging any personal information. Some sites also come with audio clips so you can hear how words are pronounced.

Of course, there are also many Web sites that specialize in specific languages. Some offer an introductory lesson, hoping you'll buy the entire program, while others generously offer a complete set of lessons at no charge. If you're looking for online lessons in a specific language, try visiting [ask.com](http://ask.com) and entering a question like "Where can I find free online Spanish lessons?" You'll get an extensive list faster than you can say "Hablo espanol."



## Hello, are you listening?

Submitted by Drusilla Fratesi, MSA

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY is one of the most valuable assets an individual can possess in terms of career advancement and long-term career success. It is just as critical in our personal lives when we communicate with family and friends. A crucial part of effective communication is listening. One of the reasons we have difficulty with listening is that our minds work five to seven times faster than our mouths. Listening, however, is a skill that can be practiced and learned.

A large difference exists between "Listening to Respond" and "Listening to Understand". Our normal listening pattern (to respond) finds us impatiently waiting for the other person to finish so we can give our answer. Often it is obvious that we didn't understand their message. The preferred method of listening (to understand) calls for us to fully understand the other person's point of view before we respond. This sometimes requires additional questions and repeating the intended message to be sure it was understood. Steven Covey, in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, said we should seek first to understand before being understood.

In order to improve our listening skills when involved in a conversation, we should consider the following:

- Show with non-verbal communication that you are engaged in the conversation and open to hearing.
- Recognize any prejudices you may have toward the speaker or subject and ask for clarification instead of making assumptions.
- Listen to understand underlying feelings the speaker may have. Notice how something is said as well as the actual words used.
- Do not interrupt. Think carefully before you speak. Get in the habit of pausing after the other person finishes speaking.

The Greek philosopher Zeno once said, "The reason that we have two ears and one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less." However, superb listening requires a mental discipline uncommonly found in most people. The challenge for all of us is to work on being better communicators by being better listeners.



## Customer Service

By: Heather Lewandowski, MWA

ARE YOU THE type of person who goes into a grocery store and quietly waits for the checker and a clerk to finish a conversation? Do you sit and wait patiently while servers in a restaurant finish chatting before taking your order? Do you wait in line at the bank while the teller finishes a call to Grandma about Timmy's Little League game? I am one of those people, but do you know who else I am? I'm the person that takes my business elsewhere. Why? Because I, along with many people, expect good customer service.

People expect professionalism. They demand courtesy. If customers don't get these things from a business, they won't make a complaint—they will just go to another store, bank, or other business where they will receive better service.

We are in a position to provide good customer service and professionalism. Many factors contribute to a person's degree of success. Yet, every successful assistant has some common traits.

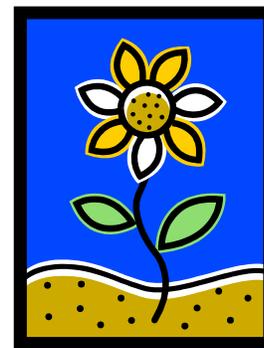
First, we don't make many mistakes. Management should make sure we are well-trained to do our jobs, and supervisors should make sure other office staff is trained as well. Although errors are a natural course of events, supervisors and employees alike should put forth the effort to “do it right” the first time. Supervisors play an important role by being an example—preferably a successful one!

Second, when mistakes are made, they should be corrected immediately. Few people expect perfection, but they do expect mistakes or difficult situations to be remedied without hearing excuses or that someone else is at fault. A true professional will take responsibility for his or her own actions.

Third, we should be courteous and really want to provide service to the Agency as a whole, supervisors, peers, and other customers. There is no excuse for a co-worker to receive a curt comment or feel ignored. Having a bad day is no reason to rudely treat a co-worker or someone who telephones.

Every successful person should have an attitude of dedication to courteous service and project that attitude to other employees and the public. A positive attitude toward the Agency and our customers will result in a positive bottom line. This will also result in employees who are proud of themselves and their Agency.

“We are in a position to provide good customer service and professionalism”



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## More Time

By Drusilla Fratesi, MSA

IT IS LIMITED. It is constant and irreversible. Nothing can be substituted for it and, once wasted, it can never be regained. It keeps getting away and you have trouble controlling it. You cannot stop it; you cannot slow it down; you cannot speed it up. It is TIME.

A British study last year found that British employees “waste” up to 80 working days every year as a result of inefficient office practices. (Yes, that said **80** working days.) According to the study, the top office time wasters (with average minutes per day) include:

- Slow PC/PC crashing/print jams (48 minutes);
- Dealing with colleagues on unnecessary issues (34 minutes);
- Unnecessary phone/conference calls (26 minutes);
- Unnecessary meetings (23 minutes).

Other wasters include dealing with unnecessary e-mails and searching for files and information that haven't been filed properly.

One of the best ways to analyze how you actually spend time is to keep an activity log. Your memory is a poor guide when it comes to everything you do in a day's time; it is too easy to forget time spent reading junk mail, talking to colleagues, making coffee, how long we take for lunch, etc. In addition to being unaware of how you spend your time, you also may be unaware of your energy levels and alertness and how they fluctuate. Effectiveness in your work may vary depending on the times you take a break, stress, blood sugar levels, distractions, or any number of factors. Because of this, it would be helpful to record activities as well as feelings (alert, tired, energetic, etc.). By analyzing the activity log, you can identify and eliminate time-wasting or low-yielding jobs. You will know your most effective times during the day and can use them to carry out your most important tasks.

The following are examples of time savers:

- Keep things simple. Handle correspondence with quick, short letters and memos.
- Throw unneeded things away. Get rid of busywork.
- Don't waste other people's time. Meetings and conference calls should have a purpose, time limit, and include only essential people.
- Get into a routine. Use checklists and to-do lists. Maintain accurate calendars.
- Establish priorities and be willing to adjust. Ensure time is set aside for high priority tasks.
- Delegate when possible and empower subordinates.
- Set aside time for reflection, planning, organizing.

Analyzing how you spend your time and implementing a few time saving methods will gain you more time without turning you into a time fanatic.

## Spring

Spring is life  
Spring is hope  
So is love and happiness  
Spring renews  
Without spring life is forlorn  
Spring is nostalgia after a bitter storm  
Put spring in your heart  
*Archie Greenidge*

