

Online Engineering Resources – Part III: Engineering Forums

Here is the third part of my three part series discussing online engineering resources. Do you ever want to ask a technical question and get an answer from an expert quickly and easily? Then online discussion forums are for you.

Forums are the online convergence of bulletin board systems and user groups. The key thing to remember is that forums are communities. They are made of members who have specific interests, knowledge and experience in common and most importantly are willing to share that knowledge and experience with others of like minded interests. So the first step is to seek out forums that are of interest or that can be helpful to you and then join the community. Generally, joining a forum is simply a matter of registering a user name and password (at no cost). Members of many forums register with some nickname (handle) so don't be surprised if you see these. But I have found that in most professional forums, members freely use their real names and identify the company they work for. After joining, I recommend that you just lurk for awhile. Read the posts (questions and answers), become familiar with which members on the forum participate regularly and are most active. Get a general feel for the members and how they relate to each other. After you have a feel for the forum, politely introduce yourself. Often this is done when you ask your first question, or post your first problem. In almost all cases, you will be welcomed into the group and the members will try to be helpful. After that, you are one of the gang. Don't be afraid to jump in and answer a question when you have something meaningful to contribute. After all, this only works if people are willing to share information.

I have broken down the engineering forums into three main categories related to software/hardware, professional societies and general engineering.

Software/hardware Forums

This is truly the online equivalent of user groups, only much more convenient. Finite Element Analysis (FEA), Computer Aided Design (CAD), office productivity, etc. – whatever application you are using you can probably find a forum dedicated to that product. And almost always there will be a few users who are very knowledgeable and very helpful. Often this is quicker and easier than trying to contact the supplier's technical support group. And it's not just software; the same is true for hardware. Data acquisition systems, computer components, etc. – usually you can find a link to the forum on the supplier's website. If you can't find a forum on the supplier's website, check on Yahoo Groups <http://groups.yahoo.com/>, or Google groups <http://groups.google.com/>. Google Groups lists over 100,000 groups. If you just can't find that special interest you are looking for, then start your own group. That is what I did for the South East Michigan Cornhuskers Alumni Group. You can also search forum postings at Google Groups. Your question may already have been discussed and answered somewhere.

Here are some examples of software/hardware forums that I belong to:

<http://www.alibre.com/forum/> - One of my CAD applications

<http://www.mcadforums.com/forums/> - A wide range of CAD related topics

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/algos-users/> - My Finite Element Analysis

application. <http://www.labjack.com/forums/index.php> - Company specific data acquisition hardware and software

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<http://www.data-acquisition.us/forum/index.php> - A wide range of data acquisition topics

Professional Societies

This category is pretty self explanatory. If you are a member of any professional organizations, chances are they have forums where you can post questions and discuss issues with your fellow members or non-members who are interested in your expertise. Here are a couple that I belong to.

<http://www.ashrae.org/template/DboardForumList> - ASHRAE, only members may post, but anyone can browse.

<https://cop.asme.org/COP/Public/Home> - ASME's "Communities of Practice" is open to both members and non-members of ASME.

General Engineering

This category includes forums that cover a wide range of engineering and technology related sites.

<http://www.eng-tips.com/> - A large site with a broad range of topics for engineering and technology professionals

<http://www.refrigeration-engineer.com/forums> - This is a UK site for refrigeration and air conditioning, but has US members also.

If you have a favorite engineering and technology related forum please share it. I'd like to hear from you.

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