

Breaking into NASA

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In the early 1990s, I posted an ad for someone who could link my team's computers so that we could work on projects simultaneously. Today, we have Dropbox and other applications.

Despite a generous salary, only one person applied. Igor had recently immigrated to the US from Ukraine with his wife and two children. He had two PhDs, one in physics and the other in computer science. He was tall and very thin, in his early 40s, and only had a few teeth. I made a mental note to refer him to a dentist after he was established.

Igor's accented English was easy to understand. I explained what I needed, and his face beamed. "I like hard things," he said. I did not know how much it would cost to link our computers, but he assured me he would do what was necessary without any cost. I was skeptical at first. But I soon learned that he was masterful at the art of bartering. I began receiving emails and phone calls from faculty and computer personnel across the University. Igor trolled the university, searching for needed computer parts, making friends everywhere he went. People were excited about what I was doing and said that Igor was the most innovative computer expert they had ever seen. Could they borrow him at some time?

Igor was the first person to arrive in the morning and the last to leave at night. Some days, I did not see him at all. Soon, packages began to arrive from various departments with notes attached. His office was a maze of computer parts in different stages of assembly. We met periodically as he shared his progress and confirmed he was building what I needed. He was excited, and I soon adapted to his toothless grin. When I asked him what life was like in Ukraine under Soviet control, he grew somber and said that his life had been hard. He loved his country and felt the Soviets were not as advanced as Ukrainians in many areas.

After about four months of bartering and tinkering, Igor announced he was ready to demonstrate our linked computers. He warned me the system he devised was a little complicated, but if it did what I wanted, he would figure out how to make it easier to operate. I was eager to see what he had done. He

pulled out a chair for me to sit next to two computers. Then he said, "Before I show you how this works, I want to show you how I break into NASA." "What!" I said. "It will only take a minute and then I will show you the new program." "You can't do that, Igor. We will both go to jail!" "I am sure it will be fine," he said, "I did this all the time back home." That was how I learned that Igor worked for a secret Ukrainian spy group. He broke into several US agencies, stealing top-secret information. I explained that breaking into federal agencies would be terrible now that he lived in the US. I don't remember much about the demonstration of how our computers would be linked, but it wasn't straightforward. I asked him to simplify it and to not break into any computers.

After I left his office, I called the security division at the university and told them what I learned about Igor. They thanked me and said they would look into it. Two weeks later, Igor came to my office with a big smile. He announced that, while he enjoyed working for me and was close to simplifying the system that linked our computers, he was offered a job at the CIA and had to leave immediately. "They want me to break into Soviet computers. That will be very easy," he said. He added that he would never forget the person who offered him his first job in the United States. It seemed no one else wanted to hire him.

I was relieved to see Igor go, as I did not know what other clandestine activities he had been involved in, and I was delighted that he landed such an important job. I only hoped that his new boss would refer him for dental care.