

Project Seneca

Turn what you know into who you know

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Abstract

Valuable capability exists everywhere. Outside formal hiring and cash markets, most of it stays socially invisible. Two people can be physically close, mutually useful, intellectually compatible and open to connection, yet remain invisible to one another because nothing identifies and legitimises the reason they should meet.

We propose Project Seneca: a peer-to-peer members' network built around what people can share, seek and pursue together. Members are onboarded by what they are willing to share with the community: their featured skills, expertise, know-how and lived experience, supported by examples of their work. They say what they hope to learn or seek in return. They also make their plans for their free time and their ambitions visible, finding others with whom to pursue them. A shared intention becomes a reason to connect, to build something or simply to enjoy doing it with someone.

Profiles and evidence make capability visible through three declared intentions:

1. What can I share and teach? (e.g. piano and composition, derivatives, chess, Farsi or a lived experience such as building a social circle from scratch in a new city)
2. What do I seek and want to learn? (e.g. Mandarin, guitar, physics, yoga, UX design and oil painting)
3. What do I want to do together? (e.g. play tennis or attend a consciousness conference)

Seneca makes the possibilities between people visible and codified. Members discover one another directly through a discovery feed or through Engineered Serendipity, the AI engine which suggests connections and ways to connect with others or exchange value that neither person might have recognised alone. Interest is expressed privately and revealed only when reciprocated, at which point a conversation opens and members can agree what they would like to do together.

1 The missing connection

Everyone around you knows something you don't. At a university, a social club, a restaurant or a cocktail party, people share a setting without knowing what they could offer one another or collaborate on. Even in some of the world's most carefully curated private members' clubs, I have found that membership establishes a degree of trust but leaves the possibilities between people largely undiscovered. Members turn to noisy, loosely organised WhatsApp groups serving too many purposes at once. Someone's expertise may be public while their willingness to share it remains unknown.

Finding a worthwhile reason to meet, and knowing whether an approach would be welcome, can take a long conversation, social confidence and the right moment. Seneca makes these possibilities discoverable beforehand.

1.1 The protégé effect

Project Seneca takes its name from an observation by Seneca the Younger: "The process is mutual; for men learn while they teach." [1] Explaining asks us to organise what we know, recognise gaps and answer questions. The contributor learns too.

Research gives this intuition substance. In a study of the protégé effect, schoolchildren teaching a virtual agent made greater effort to learn than those studying for themselves. [2] A meta-analysis of 28 studies found learning benefits from preparing to teach and teaching. [3]

In fact, as far back as the 17th century, Comenius (the father of modern education) proposed that pupils teach their classmates what they had just learned, recognising that explaining a recently digested bit of information could deepen their own understanding of it. [4] Seneca brings this principle into a community where members can be learners, sharers, seekers and teachers, strengthening their own knowledge as they share it with others.

1.2 Curiosity, purpose and belonging

Valuable does not have to mean for sale. Two people may find an exchange worthwhile that neither would purchase at the other's hourly rate for a myriad of reasons. Sharing what they know gives them access to learning they might otherwise never explore and shifts the dynamic into one of mutual curiosity and away from the crude transactionality of money.

In *The World After Capital*, Albert Wenger argues that learning, creating and sharing can give us purpose beyond work and consumption. He calls this participation in the "knowledge loop" and urges us to value curiosity beyond its usefulness in earning a living. [5] Seneca aims to make that participation personal: finding someone who awakens an interest, helping them develop theirs, and discovering something worth pursuing together.

The discoverability and possibility this enables can awaken the curiosity itself. Someone who would never necessarily search for an African drumming teacher might gladly try an afternoon with a person they would like to meet and suddenly realise they have a knack for complex polyrhythms that was dormant. A ceramicist and a pianist might discover that the weight, tension and movement of a hand offer each a new way to understand their own discipline.

"The best way to 'know' a thing is in the context of another discipline."

Leonard Bernstein · First Norton Lecture, Harvard, 1973 [6]

These connections can begin nearby, online across continents or ahead of a journey: someone in Amsterdam whose craft you want to understand might also welcome company for the exhibition you plan to visit.

That is the utopia I want to build: a community where people inspire one another to keep learning, recognise the value of what they can offer and find companionship in shared pursuits. Each contribution strengthens the network they themselves benefit from. Purpose and belonging can grow through being useful to others, with less dependence on what we can afford or whom we already know.

2 How Seneca works

Members choose which skills, interests and lived experiences to share with the community. Their profile feed will showcase their work: an essay, a scientific paper, a composition, a dish, a performance or a painting, with links to explore further on platforms such as GitHub, Google Scholar, Spotify or even Instagram/YouTube channels. Lived experience is shared in the same way: "How I built a social circle from scratch in San Francisco" or "How I processed the grief of losing a parent" can sit beside a composition or a paper. A discovery feed will curate work from across the membership, leading people from whatever catches their attention to the person behind it and what they are open to sharing, learning or pursuing together with just one call to action: human connection.

These intentions can coexist and change over time, allowing members to explore different interests without being defined by a profession or a single pursuit. What someone knows gives others a reason to be interested; what they are willing to share or do gives them a reason to approach.

Where the connection is less obvious, Engineered Serendipity draws on both members' skills, interests and intentions to suggest what they might offer one another or pursue together. Members can accept, dismiss or develop the suggestion; the AI helps them recognise a possibility and leaves them to decide whether it is worthwhile.

Some of what a member seeks, shares or has lived through is private. Members choose which of it Engineered Serendipity alone may read: context that guides a match without appearing on a profile. An introduction reveals only what each member has authorised, and that permission can be changed or withdrawn at any time. The result is richer connection on the member’s own terms.

Within a verified members’ network, members express interest privately. Only when that interest is reciprocated does a conversation open, allowing them to agree what to do, when and whether to meet online or in person.

Aim: less friction, and serendipity by design rather than by chance.

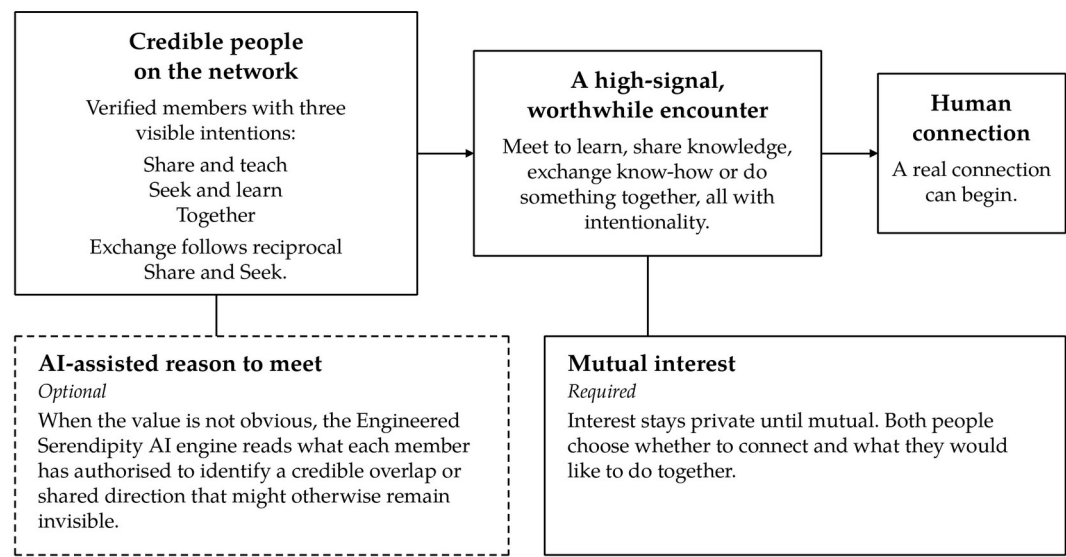


Figure 1. From visible capability and declared intention to a worthwhile encounter. AI may help identify a reason to meet; mutual interest is required. A connection can follow, but is not guaranteed.

An encounter can lead to several things, one thing or nothing. The directions below can overlap; they are not stages.

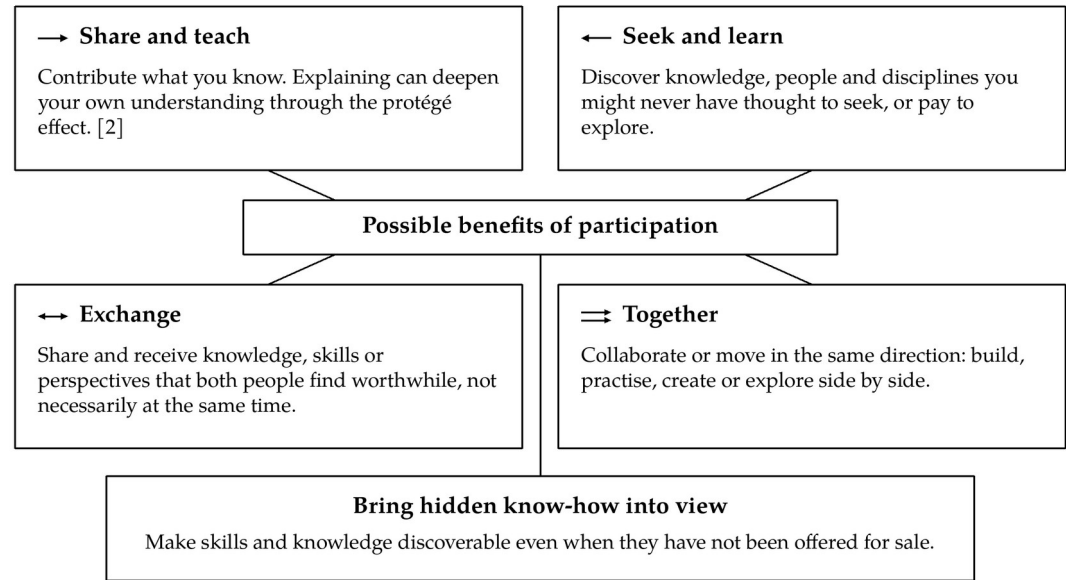


Figure 2. Possible benefits of participation. Explaining may deepen understanding; encountering another discipline may widen curiosity.

3 Reciprocity beyond the same person or moment

Direct exchange depends on what economists call the “double coincidence of wants”: each person must want what the other offers. [7] Seneca allows reciprocity to extend beyond that pair without putting a cash price on anyone’s time. Someone who shares UX design advice in Lisbon might later receive surfing guidance in Costa Rica within the members’ network, without needing to find a surfer who wants design advice. Figure 3 shows how each path is recorded.

- Before an encounter, both members confirm what each will contribute. They record whether the agreement is a one-way contribution, an Exchange or a Together encounter on Seneca’s ledger.
- Afterwards, both confirm whether the agreed contribution or encounter took place and may leave private feedback.
- In an Exchange, each person contributes, although the contributions may happen at different times. Each part is recorded separately; no vouch moves.
- For a one-way contribution, one existing vouch passes from the recipient to the contributor only after both confirm completion. Together encounters carry no vouch.

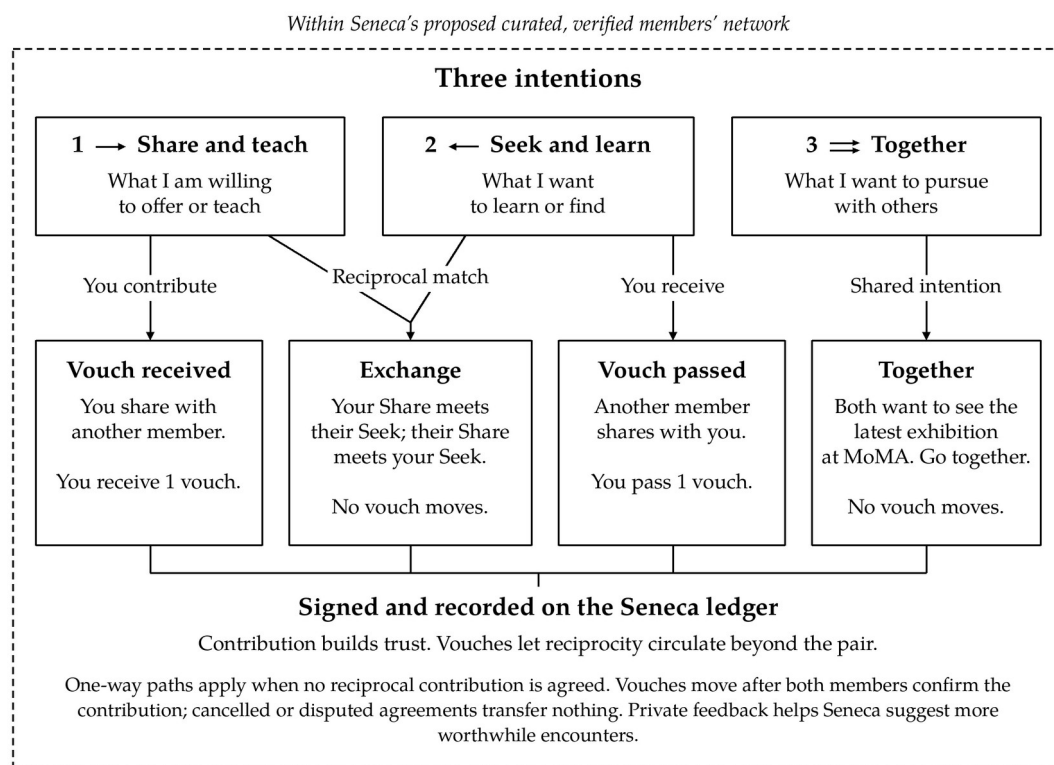


Figure 3. Three intentions within Seneca’s members’ network, and how contribution, exchange and shared plans are recorded.

The purpose is to support reciprocity without creating a market in people’s time. Under the proposed rules, vouches cannot be bought, sold or redeemed for cash, and holding one entitles nobody to another member’s attention. Each completed one-way agreement transfers one vouch, regardless of duration; this records the contribution without claiming that every contribution has equal value. A member can receive a one-way contribution only by passing a vouch, so contributing is the only way to keep receiving. Cancelled or disputed agreements transfer nothing. Exchange and Together encounters carry no vouch, and never will. Members remain free to decide what they offer and which invitations they accept.

The contribution stays on the member's record after the vouch moves on, allowing trust to accumulate while reciprocity circulates. A limited starting allocation would let members receive before contributing. Down the line, a strong record of contribution could unlock invitations and perks among the members who keep the knowledge loop moving.

4 Origin and the members' club paradox

Imperial College was a twenty-five-second walk away. When I went to pick up my girlfriend, who was studying geology there, I felt like a child with his metaphorical nose pressed against the glass, fascinated by the worlds of AI, quantum physics and robotics and the knowledge of the students studying them. I remember thinking how wonderful it would be to have unlimited cash to hire these people to teach me in my spare time. Then I heard a piano.

The sound came from Imperial's music practice rooms, where science students were working on something I could have very easily helped them with. I could improve their piano technique; they could help me understand what they were studying (whilst cementing their own knowledge of it, using the protégé effect described in Section 1.1). The possibility had been there all along.

Since then, I have enjoyed more reciprocal exchanges than I can count. (I can now even carry a respectable baritone melody without having paid a penny for singing lessons.) Learning to sing also changed how I understood phrasing, breath and space at the piano.

One of those exchanges was piano for chess with one of the UK's leading grandmasters. We both charge a considerable sum for an hour professionally, yet neither would have paid for the many hours of learning we enjoyed together. He told me that explaining the Sicilian Najdorf had deepened his own understanding of it, while chess gave me new ways to think about musical theory and memory. Several years later, we remain friends.

I have since exchanged photography for film scoring, tennis for music theory, and music production for a place to stay. These arrangements grew from relationships I had spent twenty years building, yet even then the opportunities could take time to recognise and suggest. Seneca grew from wanting to make them available beyond the connections someone has spent decades establishing.

During ten years at Soho House, including time advising on member connection, I have seen people arrive with friends and leave with the same friends. People at Zero Bond, Annabel's, 5 Hertford Street, Maison Estelle and The Twenty Two describe the same frustration, as do those attending carefully curated scientific conferences and tech summits: bringing people together leaves much of what they might offer one another undiscovered.

On Soho House noticeboards, I collected more than sixty requests to exchange skills or apartments in just a few weeks. The writing was literally on the wall: people wanted to share what they knew or had in return for something another person could offer. What was missing was a reliable way to find one another.

5 Why now and the opportunity to grow

Seneca proposes a horizontality of knowledge: people learning across disciplines, where someone's expertise makes them a teacher in one encounter and their curiosity makes them a learner in another.

This has value beyond employment. The World Health Organization estimates that one in six people worldwide experiences loneliness. [8] In *Lost Connections*, Johann Hari explores how disconnection from other people, meaningful work (often within a community) and meaningful values can contribute to depression and anxiety. [9] We need opportunities to feel useful, encounter different perspectives and develop relationships through something we actually want to do. Learning together gives people a reason to meet and something to build on afterwards.

The ways we discover and spend time with one another also deserve rethinking. US research on dating apps shows that excitement and disappointment often coexist, while a 2024 survey in England found that younger adults were less likely than older adults to report drinking in the previous week. [10, 11] There is room for socialising built around shared interests and pursuits, where a conversation begins with something more specific than the fact that two people happen to be available.

Information is abundant and AI has made it cheaper still to reach, yet neither tells us what is worth our attention. Research on choice overload suggests that choosing becomes harder when options are complex and we are unsure what we want. [12] We may have access to a thousand courses without knowing which subject would excite us, while an encounter with the right person could make an unfamiliar discipline compelling. It is also dramatically easier to fix one's yoga posture in person than over an online tutorial.

The technology now gives us a practical way to help those encounters happen. The cost of using AI at a given level of capability has fallen sharply. [13] Seneca uses AI to interpret the descriptions of work, interests and intentions that members authorise it to read, and to suggest possibilities that a search by job title might miss. Members decide whether to pursue them.

The opportunity is to make our time with other people more deliberate, intentional and rewarding. An invite-only founding cohort and waiting list are being built. Seneca's first communities will test whether these introductions lead to worthwhile encounters and continued participation. The technology should help people find a reason to meet, not a reason to keep scrolling. Where, for example, a dating app succeeds, it usually means a member leaves the pool for good. A successful Seneca encounter can give them a reason to return: discovering what becomes possible with one person opens their curiosity to others, nearby or across the world. As their interests and ambitions evolve, so do their reasons to participate.

6 Our vision for the future

The internet made information searchable. Seneca's ambition is to make the possibilities between people and, in time, organisations discoverable. An immense amount of human potential remains unrealised because people never discover what they could offer one another, or that an approach would be welcome.

We expect personal agents to become an increasingly important part of everyday life, helping people discover and curate information, opportunities and experiences around their individual interests and intentions. Alongside exploring Seneca themselves, members could also authorise their personal agents to discover these possibilities on the platform: a musician whose visit coincides with yours, a researcher who would welcome your perspective, an old friend whose new ambition intersects with something you could help them realise. With permission, agents could explore these overlaps and prepare worthwhile proposals, allowing people to act on intentions that might otherwise remain unspoken for years.

Every existing community could become richer through the capabilities, curiosity and generosity already within it. Seneca could provide the shared infrastructure for this world: intentions that people control, evidence that helps establish capability, and a ledger of confirmed contributions through which a history of reciprocity can develop. Discovery could begin with what we might make possible together, including things neither person would have known to search for. Our ambition is to make that experience an ordinary part of life: to give human possibility a means of circulation, so that more of what people know, imagine and are willing to contribute finds its way to someone who values it.

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