

Networking in academia

Generating and enhancing relationships with your acquaintances and colleagues will create a diverse network of sponsors eager to help you succeed

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Many academic scientists reject the very idea of networking for a variety of reasons. Many feel that acquiring and using professional contacts is more appropriate for those in industry or business, but not in academia. Tenured faculty may feel that they have already achieved the peak of their career and no longer need to put forth the effort to get to know new people. Younger scientists may shy away from the idea of proactively approaching peers and senior colleagues because they are introverted or because they don't know how to start. However, the tendency to refrain from networking can limit scientists from reaching their full potential. Scientists with an expanded network of contacts have an edge when it comes to grants, publications, awards, invitations to speak, coveted job offers, and promotions. Whether you are in academia or industry, whether you are naturally introverted or extroverted, or whether you are at an early or late stage of your career, it is important to develop and improve your networking skills. This article outlines an approach for generating and cultivating valuable relationships that turn acquaintances into sponsors for your future career. On many levels, this advice will sound like common sense, and it is. However, the advantage of this approach is that it breaks down a seemingly overwhelming task into practical steps and provides motivation to implement those steps.

Some people think of networking as kissing up to influential people, or building professional relationships for advancing their career. However, this view is too limited because everyone—not just influential people or members of your profession—has the potential to influence your career in

a positive or negative manner. Someone who you view as non-influential now may progress to be in a powerful position later. Students in combined MD/PhD programs come to realize this all too well when they leave medical school for several years to complete their PhD and years later apply to medical residencies only to find that their previous peers have become their chief residents and supervisors. Many scientists find themselves in similar situations in which some of their contemporaries or even subordinates become their grant reviewers, manuscript reviewers, or even direct superiors.

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Even those who are only peripherally involved in your life have the potential to either help you or leave you stranded. Being kind to the bus driver may pay off the day you are running late and chasing the bus; being nice to administrative staff may pay off the day you urgently need help filing a grant application; being friendly to your childcare-givers may pay off the day they agree to watch your sick kid so you can go to an important meeting. Once we start seeing all people as having the potential to either support us or ignore us—or worse, even sabotage us—, it is easy to see the value in including everyone in your network.

Perhaps a more motivating definition of networking is the cultivation of sponsors. It

is important to make the distinction between mentors and sponsors. Mentors provide advice, guidance, support, and act as a sounding board when needed. In contrast, a sponsor is someone who advocates for you behind closed doors. Sponsors believe in your potential and want good things for you, and when they come across opportunities to help you, they act on those. A 2-year study by Talent Innovation CEO Sylvia Ann Hewlett, which sampled 12,000 men and women in white-collar occupations across the USA and the UK, showed that sponsorship, and not mentorship, makes a measurable difference in career progress. While mentors are important and can also act as sponsors, they are by definition limited to your closer working environment, while every acquaintance can in some way become a sponsor.

Sponsors can fall into either of two groups: your Core Network—people whom you see every day—and your Extended Network—people whom you meet at conferences or social events. To develop sponsors within your Core Network, you must accomplish two goals: develop relationships using the SIR (Smile, Importance, Recognize) approach and enhance those relationships using the TRI (Task, Recommend, Information) approach.

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Smile: It seems pretty absurd to discuss the value of smiling, but it is the first and simplest step in building and strengthening



relationships and careers. A study found that observers rated pictures of smiling people as likeable, confident, conscientious, and stable; the same traits desirable when it comes to hiring decisions [1]. Unfortunately, when people are not smiling, their 'neutral' expression tends to look like a scowl, which gives the impression that you are unfriendly and unapproachable. Even worse, walking around with a fake or nervous smile makes one seem disingenuous or anxious. Therefore, it is critical to find a legitimate reason to genuinely smile. One motivator is that smiling triggers activity in the left frontal cortex in an area of the brain that registers happiness, causes the release of endorphins, and decreases breathing and heart rate [2,3]. In other words, smiling, regardless of how you felt before you smiled, causes neurological and physiological changes that make you happy and relaxed. An even more powerful motivator is that this effect extends to other people. Studies show that seeing someone

smile can activate muscles in the viewer's face that mirror the expression without the viewer being aware of it [4]. Therefore, your smile will cause the same biological and emotional effects in the people around you, building your network without having to say a word.

Importance: Everyone has a deep-seeded desire to feel important [5]. You can build powerful relationships by fulfilling that need in others. This can be accomplished by following the conversation exemplified in Table 1. The goals of the conversation are to discover and validate what is important to the other person, to make them smile, to achieve your objective, and to exit the conversation gracefully. While it is formulaic, it is extremely effective in building strong connections with those around you.

Start this conversation with people in your Core Network with: "Hi (insert name), what's new with you?" It is essential to use the person's name to make the person feel

important [5]. While this question seems simple and innocuous, its power is that when people answer this question, they're really answering the question "what is the most important thing going on in your life right now?" After asking the question, listen to discover what is important to them. Once you have discovered this, acknowledge what they just said in a manner that demonstrates that you understand how they feel and in a way that will make them smile. This will usually prompt them to reveal more about their situation, so be prepared to validate their feelings and make them smile again. Since their smiling will trigger the biological responses that make them happy, consistently using this conversational approach will cause people to have an automatic positive response every time they see you or think about you. This is an effective way to turn people into sponsors.

The next goal in the conversation is to get down to business of why you started this

Table 1. Examples for starting and guiding a conversation.

Discover	Validate/Elicit Smile	Discover More	Validate/Elicit Smile	Achieve your Objective	Escape Phrase and Conclusion
I'm swamped at work	That sounds rough, you must be working hard	Yes, I've been working 12 hours a day for the last 2 weeks	Wow, that sounds like you need a vacation	I know you're super busy, but I was hoping to get some help filling out this paperwork. Is there a time that would be better for you or is there anyone else who could help?	Great, well I have to get back to work/ meet my boss/go to a seminar/grab some lunch. I hope everything goes well at work/on your vacation/at the recital
I'm going on vacation	That sounds fun, you must be excited	We're going on a cruise around the Mediterranean	That sounds like an amazing vacation		
I'm going to my kid's recital	That sounds nice	Yes, she's first chair at her section	You must be really proud of her		

conversation, that is to get what you need from this person. Once you have met your need, it is important to have an escape phrase because you cannot spend all day talking to people. You need to gracefully exit the conversation in a way that leaves a positive impression. It is critical that your escape phrase or explanation is honest, because if you tell someone you have to go to a meeting and afterwards they see you anywhere else, you will have lost all credibility with that person. Once you have stated your escape phrase, conclude by wishing them well in a manner specific to what they have shared with you during the conversation.

Recognize: It is helpful during every interaction to identify a trait you admire in the other person and tell them. Some examples include that they are talented, a natural leader, good mentor, great writer, or doing exciting science. Nearly everyone has redeeming qualities. Recognizing those qualities is beneficial because it identifies traits you want to emulate, and it gives the recipient a sense of pride and reinforces that behaviour.

Tasks: It is important to remember that relationships are a two-way street. You cannot expect someone to be a sponsor for you without giving them something in return. In academia, this could be completing a task for them such as serving on a committee, reviewing a manuscript or grant application, and offering to give a talk or to contribute to a project. These last two can be especially beneficial in multiple ways. Giving a talk demonstrates your expertise to a wider audience, which naturally expands your network. Collaborating

also demonstrates your expertise and has the additional potential to lead to publications.

Recommend: Recommendations can be any form of advice, but don't limit your recommendations to the purely scientific. Broaden your relationship by recommending a favourite book, restaurant, or movie. Making recommendations not only makes you seem well informed and helpful, it will also make you more memorable because others will think of you every time they follow that recommendation. The more often people think of you, the more likely they will think of you when a sponsorship opportunity arises.

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Information: Similarly, there are often opportunities to help others by sharing information such as protocols and papers, or telling them about people who may be able to help them solve problems. In addition, sharing information about promotions, job openings, or awards is also helpful and will also put you in good standing with others. If there is ever an opportunity to nominate someone for an award, do so. Ask the person you're nominating for any information that you can use to write the most convincing nomination. They will be flattered, grateful, and happy to help you. They will also be more

likely to nominate you for an award when the opportunity arises. This is not rocket science but just common sense: being nice and helpful to others will eventually be rewarded in kind.

The second group of people that are potentially helpful is your Extended Network: people you meet at poster sessions, talks, conferences, or social events. These are relationships that you have to build from scratch, which is more difficult and sometimes even daunting. It is helpful to go through the participants list before you go to scientific or social events to see whom you want to meet and talk to. Yet, it is also important to remember be open because anyone you meet at these events has the potential to become a valuable member of your network.

The first and most difficult step is to make initial contact and to overcome the typical reluctance of talking to strangers. Simply use every chance to talk to any person within three feet: in elevators, at lunch, at poster sessions, waiting in line for food. This will allow you to practise phrases and approaches, to become more confident in initiating conversations, and will help you to meet more people than you would have otherwise. Use any observation as a conversation starter such as “These elevators are really slow” or “That food smells delicious”. This puts people at ease and usually causes them to smile and respond. After a small amount of chatting, the next step is to introduce yourself: “Hi, I'm Jane Doe (Name), I'm a graduate student (Rank) in Cell Biology (Location, say your department if you're at a local event or say your university if you're at a national/international

event)". The other person will usually respond by telling you their name, rank, and location.

The next step is to get them talking. Since it would not be appropriate to ask "What's new with you", you can ask how they like their department or university, ask about their research, or ask anything else they are likely to know such as local restaurants or attractions. During the conversation, it is critical to make mental notes of three specific things, "The Big Three", as you will need this information when you contact them again later: (i) think about what information they are giving you that is helpful to you, (ii) think of what you can give them (TRI), and (iii) identify what you admire about them.

To draw the conversation to a close, tell them they have been very helpful and that their department or university sounds interesting. Ask them whether it is okay to contact them again if you have any questions in the future. This is a great legitimate reason to ask for an email address or a business card. At this point, look at their business card and conclude with a phrase along the lines: "(Dr. Smith/Frank), it was really nice to meet you. I need to meet up with a couple of other people/grab some food, but I hope we can meet again. I'll definitely send you that article/information/protocol that we talked about". Alternatively, you can conclude by using your new contact to expand your network. Say "I don't know very many people at this conference. I would love to meet some interesting people in my field/your field/etc. Do you know of any people I could talk to?" This is not only a great way to expand your extended network, but also a tactful way to move out of a dead-end conversation into new opportunities. The next step is to change your mental notes into physical notes on the back of the business card whenever you have time. This will enable you to compose a well-written email after the conference.

After the event, email all of your new contacts so that your interaction is still fresh in their memory. Other than saying "It was really nice meeting you", which is generic, the email must

contain "The Big Three": (i) thank them for the specific information they gave you and tell them why it is helpful to you, (ii) give them something (TRI), especially if you told them during the conversation that you were going to send them something, and (iii) tell them what you admire about them. Do not exclude this last point. Letting people know what you admire about them is what will make you stand out as memorable. Even if you feel that you are not going to pursue a relationship with that person or their institution, it is better to build that connection and not need it than to not build the connection and wish you had.

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Email makes it incredibly easy to network, so use it at every opportunity to remind people who you are and what you are doing; most efficiently by inviting them to your talks, poster sessions, award ceremonies, and other events. As with business cards, the etiquette of these invitations is that there should be a legitimate reason for contacting them. You can accomplish this by saying that they have provided you with valuable advice, support, encouragement, and/or inspiration, essentially saying that something they have done has played a role in you being able to carry out the research that you are presenting or for which you are receiving an award. Telling others that they played a role in your success will consciously or subconsciously make them feel like they are invested in your success and will make them want to do more to help you succeed. Writing an email after every encounter and always using "The Big Three" will allow you to build and maintain incredibly strong and hugely beneficial relationships with everyone in your network.

Networking is somewhat like exercise in that it requires extensive time and effort without being able to see immediate results. However, over time, you will see signs that your efforts are paying off: your support staff is willing to help you more than others, you have a friendly relationship with your colleagues and superiors and they speak highly of you, you are told of opportunities that other people are not made aware of, you have a large number of people you feel you can count on for help, you are invited to give talks, or you are nominated for coveted awards or positions. All of these are indications that you are developing a healthy network that will help you achieve your career goals. However, as previously mentioned, networking is not a narrowly focused strategy just to advance your career, but a broader approach to see the value in developing friendly relationships with everyone you meet. As such, academics should not reject the very idea of networking out of hand, but embrace it as a valuable strategy for surrounding yourself with happy people who are happy to help you.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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