CPD: The Professional Helpsheet Series

NETWORKING
 FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
How to establish beneficial professional relationships
What is networking?

Networks are groups of people with some common interest who share knowledge and assist each other in some way. Many of these networks arise without particular effort from you, for example you may still be in touch with people you have previously worked with. Some networks are already established, perhaps by a professional body or an alumni society. However, active networking involves seeking out individuals and building mutually beneficial relationships with them. These individuals may be able to help you directly or may put you in contact with other helpful people — and you may be able to return the favour.

The main principle of networking is that, through interaction, people can share knowledge and therefore aid each other’s development.

Misconceptions of networking

The concept of purposefully networking for professional gain is often perceived quite negatively. Many people tend to think that it is not really something they can engage with because:

- Networking involves stalking ‘important’ people and being sycophantic towards them.
- Those involved in networking are insincere people who pretend to be interested in other people merely in order to see what they can get out of them.
- A network is another name for a clique which helps its members and excludes others.
- Networking is for only for those with lots of ambition who want to rise up the ladder by making the right contacts.
- Networking involves being very good at making small talk with complete strangers and remembering the names of the children of someone you met at a conference three years ago.

These views may indicate an aversion to self-promotion or a feeling that networking is in some way manipulative. However, it is important to remember that networking is not a one-way process in which you are taking advantage of people, but rather a process of exchanging information and knowledge for the benefit and development of all parties.

Why network?

There are a number of direct and indirect benefits of becoming actively involved in a network or networks.

Knowledge sharing

Those involved within a network tend to learn from each other through constant dialogue and interaction. There are two types of learning that go on in networking. Intentional learning occurs when you actively seek specific knowledge from other people in a network. Serendipitous learning comes about when you pick up useful knowledge that you did not know existed or were unaware that you needed. The broader the network and the more dialogue and interaction there is within it, the greater the likelihood of serendipitous learning taking place.

Discussing your area of knowledge with others inside or outside the field can help you to gain a wider perspective and make interesting connections between subjects that you may not have been able to generate on your own. In the same way, your own knowledge may be of benefit to others. It is easy to think that you can only make valuable contributions to others if you have more experience or expertise, but those who are more knowledgeable may learn from the fresh approach of someone new to the field.
**Assistance and support**
A support network can be absolutely essential in handling the stresses and strains of the contemporary work environment. By offering and receiving support from your peers you may more easily overcome challenges and problems by profiting from the experiences of others. Many professionals find that the notion of ‘giving something back’ has great resonance and appeal. For some it is a duty to promote fellow professionals. For some it is a pleasure — renewing their enthusiasm for their field by exposing themselves to the energy of the new entrant. For all there is the reward of helping other people to benefit from your hard-earned wisdom. They may even seek to act as a mentor to less experienced colleagues, giving feedback and support over a period of development.

**Career development and progression**
Some of the information you glean from your networks can help you when you are considering a career move. You may hear of opportunities through your contacts that you would otherwise not have discovered. In addition, you may be able to gain inside knowledge of the day-to-day realities of a job or the culture of a workplace which will enable you to make an informed career transition rather than a leap into the dark. You may be able to gain advanced warning of the particular abilities and qualities that are most likely to be appreciated by a potential employer.

It is also true that networking may improve your chances of obtaining a position. Personal recommendation is very important in academic and professional life. Your professional competence may be easy to ascertain from your CV. It is harder to assess the interpersonal factors that will have an impact on your future colleagues — attitudes, work style, handling stress, diplomacy, etc. Consequently, managers will often feel less nervous about recruiting people whom they have met or of whom they have heard a good report. Someone who has been networking is more likely to be known or known about, and empirical evidence suggests that this confers a significant advantage. If you do not have the abilities, you will not be recruited solely because of your network. However, networking can ensure that your talents are more widely known and readily appreciated.
Building your network

Who to network with

Networking often starts with your interest in your professional environment, and your network can include anyone that is within or on the outskirts of that environment. In this way it is a means of maintaining links with your wider profession, and your profession’s stakeholders. People involved in networking are interested in what other people are doing and look for common features, themes and threads.

Your home network is comprised of the people that you are likely to come into contact with regularly anyway. This will include:

- your immediate work colleagues
- other people in the same building or facility
- your fellow students, lecturers and tutors, if you are studying.

Beyond this you have your wider network, which is made up of people that you might meet less often, but whom you could contact relatively easily. This could be:

- previous work colleagues
- people from other organisations, disciplines or countries that you have interacted with in some way
- alumni from your place of study
- other Institute of Physics members who you might meet at events.

Beyond your wider network is your potential network. This consists of the people who you do not have a direct connection with yet but who may have a shared interest or useful knowledge. You may identify such potential contacts through:

- asking existing members of your home or wider network
- paying attention to relevant publications or conferences
- directly investigating relevant organisations, institutions or professional bodies.

Making contact

The most common issue with your home or wider networks is remembering to make contact purposefully. Because you see them regularly, you may neglect to ask about them about potentially useful information or contacts.

When it comes to making new contacts, the initial stage is often the most challenging. In some cases a direct approach can be appropriate: explaining clearly the information you need and why you need it, especially if you do not want to impose too much on a busy person. However, do not forget that you are trying to build a sustainable long-term professional relationship. It can be more productive to start out with a period of exploration — finding out about the other person: who they are, what they do, what interests them, what their needs are, etc. This will help you to identify common areas that may be built on later. Good networking starts by taking an interest in what other people are doing. Ideally this should build on knowledge you have already gained through preparatory research.

Conferences are famously where networking takes place. By attending, people have already expressed an underlying interest in similar topics. If you have undertaken some research it can become easier to initiate a conversation about the work being presented as you are more likely to be able to discuss it intelligently with fellow delegates. You may be more confident to ask questions in the Q&A slots or even in the social areas afterwards.

It is important, once you have made initial contact to record it in some way. Keep contact details along with any information which you have gleaned from them. Recording is a good practice because many ‘contact’ events are so slight they are easy to forget and it makes following up on a contact far easier if you can refer to a shared moment.
Developing contacts

It is useful to think about developing contacts in stages starting with easy to fulfil objectives that do not impose too much on your contact. As the relationship develops, your expectations may gradually increase — always remembering that you should be looking for opportunities to reciprocate. The following stages of expectation may be typical.

- Answers. All you are expecting from your contact is information: answers to your well-prepared questions, knowledge and insights from their experiences. This is something they could give to anyone.
- Advice. This requires them to focus on you a little, offering suggestions, feedback and recommendations tailored to your situation and needs. This is still just talking, nothing more.
- Assistance. At this stage you may feel it appropriate to ask your contact to actually do something for you. This could include passing on new information they come across, giving you opportunities for development or looking out for opportunities on your behalf.
- Advocacy. By now they know you well enough to speak on your behalf to others. They may suggest you as a suitable candidate for opportunities or act as a referee.
- Alliance. This indicates a long-term, proactive interest in your development. It could be a mentoring or collaborative relationship. By this stage it will almost certainly be mutually beneficial.

During every interaction try to think about what your contact is getting out of it. Even if someone is helping you out of common goodness and the desire to pass on their wisdom they will value feedback on how helpful they have been. A simple follow up e-mail or letter expressing your thanks and appreciation can be encouraging, especially if you can tell them how the information they have provided has been of help you.

If all of this seems too difficult or daunting it may be worth considering a training course. There are courses in networking skills but do not confine yourselves to these. Any course that builds confidence in communicating could bolster your ability to build an effective professional network, for example courses in assertiveness, handling meetings, business correspondence, etc.

It is important to recognise that networking is not a distraction from your job but a part of enhancing your effectiveness in your job and developing your career. It requires time, thought, skill and action, but the rewards in the long term can be immense.

Additional information sources

- How to build your network (articles and resources from Science Careers)  
  [https://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/tools_resources/how_to_guides/how_to_build_your_network](https://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/tools_resources/how_to_guides/how_to_build_your_network)

- The Networking Survival Guide: Get the Success You Want by Tapping into the People You Know by Diane Darling.  
- Information interviewing [http://career.ucla.edu/explore/info/](http://career.ucla.edu/explore/info/)

Written by: Terry Jones & David Winter of The Careers Group, University of London

© Institute of Physics 2007