

By Peter M. Grace

# Learning the lessons of networking

**W**hen I was a young researcher, networking did not come naturally to me. I am a quiet person, and I preferred to engage with people I was already familiar with. However, I saw that many successful networkers also had successful careers with thriving, collaborative research programs and frequent speaking invitations. So, during my postdoc, I started making an effort to overcome my reclusive tendencies and build my professional network—and it has paid off. The network that I have built has championed my career advancement and contributed to my intellectual and professional development. Many of the opportunities that have come my way, including a tenure-track assistant professorship that I will begin next fall, have arisen from networking.

Because networking lacks direct or immediate outcomes, it is easy to ignore during academic training that focuses on quantifiable measures of success such as published articles and awarded grants and fellowships. It is also tempting to dismiss networking as a marketing ploy that distracts from scientific work that should speak for itself. As an initially hesitant networker, I have picked up some tips for those who want to develop a network without compromising their scientific or professional integrity but don't know where to start.

**Attend conferences.** With my mentor's approval, I prioritized conference attendance when I began my postdoc, even when it meant paying out of my own pocket. I chose three conferences to regularly attend each year. For me, this was the right number to reap the rewards of meeting people without disrupting my labwork; your optimal number might be different. Attending this variety of meetings, each with its unique but slightly overlapping profile of attendees, struck a balance between continually meeting new people from my broader field and strengthening the relationships with those in my niche discipline by seeing them multiple times a year.

**Socialize.** As an introvert, I usually want to retreat to my hotel room after a full day at a conference, but instead, I push myself to take advantage of the multiple formal and informal social events to further develop existing relationships and make new connections. Several of my collaborations have arisen from these conversations. Make the most of those opportunities by resisting the tendency to socialize exclusively with your friends.

**Cold call.** When I want to meet established researchers, I take the initiative to approach them directly, even if we



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The goodwill that follows will go a long way to help you become known not as a leech but as a good colleague and a knowledge hub.

**Build your network before you need it.** Developing a network during training, before you're actively looking to make your next career move, also helps minimize the feeling that networking is just self-serving. It avoids the awkwardness of starting a professional relationship with a request and allows you to sincerely build a network of peers and colleagues without ulterior motives. Remember that in the end, a strong network is based on its members' mutual respect for one another as scientists and friends. ■

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Editor's Summary

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