

Techniques to Successfully Navigate Networking

By Jennifer Anderson

For some people, networking can feel awkward, seemingly self-serving, discouraging, and embarrassing. Many people consider the term “networking” a dirty word and don’t like the uncomfortable feelings that come from attending a networking event. Uncomfortable or not, if you are not networking it is going to be much harder to grow and develop as a professional. Networking has the power to help you in very significant ways in your professional and personal life.

Here are four techniques to help you navigate the world of networking more effectively:

1) Know the difference between types of networking.

Networking is not limited to attending a luncheon to hear a guest speaker share thoughts about an engineering-related topic. Networking can look like many different things, such as volunteering for a cause that you’re interested in, participating in an industry conference, taking additional college courses and getting to know your classmates through group projects, joining a running club, etc. Networking should never just be limited to a bunch of people in a room trying to get other people’s business cards!

It can be valuable to attend luncheons and learn from other professionals, but take some time to evaluate how you want to make a difference in the world. For example, the author has a colleague who is interested in STEM initiatives (Science Technology Engineering Math) to help adolescents learn about different ways they can engage with the world of science. She believes it is important to help children and teens learn about how science and math help better our world. As those children come to realize the importance of STEM, their eyes are open to more possibilities and they find themselves more interested in math and science courses. The ripple effect is quite substantial in their education and career. Along the way, the author’s colleague has met numerous individuals that have helped her stay connected in her field.

As you find groups of people that are interested in similar hobbies, community causes, professional development, and so on, you will come to meet some interesting, passionate,

and thoughtful people. That is when networking becomes fun and worthwhile!

2) Make time for networking.

This might seem like a very basic technique, but if it is so easy to do, why is it that people do not make time for networking? Typically, people say that they are “too busy” with work to network. Later, when they are ready to make a job change, or ready to hire a new person for the firm, they find themselves with weak connections to people in their network.

It is imperative to invest in people within your professional circles so that you have time to get to know them, help them get to know you, and build trust and respect. In the future, you will be able to comfortably contact them when you’re looking to make a job change or add to your team. If you find yourself feeling awkward at networking events, it’s likely you are not participating in something that is interesting and thought provoking for you.

Action item: Look at your calendar and mark out two lunch periods in the next month to meet up with people from your network. These networking lunches may well be some of the best “work time” you will spend each month because you are likely to connect on a deeper level, gain valuable professional and technical insights, and also make an impact in someone’s life.

3) Follow-up on social media.

After meeting new people, follow-up and connect through social media. LinkedIn is a good place for connecting with other professionals. LinkedIn is where most people think to connect professionally.

However, just because you are connected on LinkedIn or any social media platform, does not mean you are instantly best friends. You will still need to nurture and cultivate relationships. Look for ways to stay in touch. Find articles to share that you think will be interesting to specific people, then copy the URL and share it in a message. Periodically check-in with your connections. Even a quick “hello” message goes a long way.

One major benefit of being active on social media is that you will be exposed to other people who are likely outside your immediate circles. Join groups on LinkedIn to interact

with other interesting people who live and work in different marketplaces. Gaining a different perspective is a great way to grow and develop – and you may be an interesting voice to someone else on the other side of the country.

4) “So, what do you do?”

Be ready to answer that all-too-common question. In answering, you have a chance to differentiate yourself from other people.

Stop and think about it. That question can be a conversation killer. After you answer the question, you typically ask them back, “And what do you do?” Then where do you go with the conversation? It’s a dead-end question. The best advice – do not ask the dreaded “So, what do you do?” Instead, ask other thoughtful questions that will help you to engage in better conversations. Some thought provoking questions might include:

“What brings you to this conference?”

“What have you learned at this trade show that is the most intriguing to you so far?”

“What does your firm specialize in?”

Conversations get much more interesting and far less awkward when you are discussing meaningful information beyond telling each other your job titles.

In the end, networking can lead to great conversations and professional opportunities. Do not hold yourself back. Plan to attend. Go. Bring your business cards. Have a goal of meeting 2 to 3 people at the event. Then, wash, rinse, and repeat. You will find, over time, that networking is truly a wonderful way to meet and keep in touch with other interesting and thought-provoking professionals. This will, in turn, provide you the opportunity to build your professional network, enhance the probability for future opportunities in your career, and add interesting people to your firm.■



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