



IT'S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW, IT'S WHO YOU KNOW?

ANDY FURLONG OFFERS SOME TIPS FOR EARLY-CAREER ENGINEERS WHO ARE NEW TO THE WORLD OF NETWORKING

On the all-too-regular occasions when he missed out on a business opportunity, a disgruntled former colleague of mine was prone to uttering the oft-heard excuse, “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know!” I’ve reflected on his gripe over the years and I’ve reached the conclusion that he may have been right, but not in the way that he intended.

In the past, it was often the case that the right family connections, the right school tie or membership of the right club were all that was needed to oil the wheels of business and commerce. Today I argue that, in many ways, we live in more meritocratic times. Wider access to higher education, social mobility and the power of the internet has opened up a wealth of new possibilities for young chemical engineers from many different backgrounds. Seizing these possibilities is far easier if you know how to go about it. Success depends on what you know *and* who you know and it’s time to get networking.

The simplest definition of networking goes something like this: meeting informally with others who have common interests and which could potentially benefit your personal or business needs. It’s an essential soft skill. Many people attribute their personal and business success on their ability to network. Networking and the development of good contacts can generate lots of opportunities. Whether you are actively looking for a new job or researching markets or companies you are interested in working for, networking can be the key to those job opportunities that never get advertised. It can also be used to secure new business and find out the latest industry developments and top-level thinking, making it a desirable skill to have.

NETWORKING IS NOTHING NEW

There’s nothing particularly new about networking. In 1624 the English poet and cleric John Donne famously observed

“no man is an island”. However, the word “network” did not appear in the dictionary until after the Second World War and the expression “networking” did not enter common use until the late 1970s. The feminist leader Mary Welsh first used the word network as a verb in 1980. Thus the term as we know it today has its roots in the women’s movement. Immediately this suggests that networking is associated with a less individualistic, less macho approach to business. It’s not about pushy, power-dressed men thrusting their business cards at you – sorry chaps!

Networking is not for the selfish. The good networker, male or female, needs three attributes:

- up-front acknowledgement that personal success depends on mutual success and the creation of win-win situations;
- a willingness to reciprocate and recognise that it is difficult to survive without the support of others; and
- a sense of generosity coupled with unconditionality. Giving is not a precursor to receiving but unsurprisingly, one good turn frequently leads to another.

Armed with this mindset, the next consideration is preparation. Effective networkers have a pretty good idea as to why they are networking. Moreover, they generally know themselves and they know what they want to achieve in life and in their work. And provided they’ll let you get a word in edgeways, they’re generally good company and useful people to know.

PERSONAL MASTERY

It’s always a good idea to have a clear idea of your achievements and accomplishments in life. Being able to describe what you’ve done will put you in a better position to describe what you want. The leading American systems thinker, Peter Senge, calls this discipline “personal mastery”, defining

it as an individual's ability to expand their personal capacity to create the results they most desire. This creates an environment that encourages everyone to develop themselves toward the goals and purposes they choose. The good networker does this instinctively, but achieving this state of self awareness can prove challenging. Next time you are presented with a networking opportunity, ask yourself the following questions: What is happening right now? What am I doing right now? What am I feeling right now? What am I thinking right now?

This process should prompt a further question: What do I want right now? Give it a try. Often simply the act of asking this question will provoke a change in your world view and it may lead to a final crucial question: What am I doing right now to prevent myself from getting what I want? The answer is always really empowering, it will help you to develop your personal 'brand' and it will put you in the right frame of mind to benefit from the contacts that you make and to quickly spot opportunities when and as they arise.

TAKE THE PLUNGE

Sooner or later, you'll need to take the plunge and try out your new found-awareness on a complete stranger. It helps enormously if you have mastered a short self-introduction that you feel entirely comfortable with. This should take no more than 20 seconds. Ideally you should work up a headline that summarises what you do in a single sentence. It's important to state what you do – not what you are. "I'm looking at ways of saving energy in the food industry" is more dynamic and more interesting than "I'm a chemical engineer". You should also aim to be distinctive. What is different about your work and why do you enjoy it?

Engineers and scientists often fall into the jargon trap. It makes us feel comfortable, but there's often a real danger that no-one outside our narrow community understands what we are talking about. So use familiar language and avoid too many technical terms. We know that chemical engineering matters, but others don't. Think about ways of describing what you do in terms of the impact it has on others. Above all, use lots of verbs. Verbs mean action and the way that you describe your actions will bring your conversations to life. Most of all, engage. Smile; use clear and steady eye contact and avoid the temptation to apologise for your existence. Never say, "I'm just a graduate engineer" or "I'm only here because my boss told me to come". If in doubt, rerun the personal mastery questions in your head.

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

In order to keep conversations going it helps if you ask targeted open questions. Some

THINGS LOOK TO BE PICKING UP AFTER THE DOWNTURN – WHAT'S IT LIKE IN PERTH?

HOW ARE YOU APPROACHING THE NEXT ASSET MANAGEMENT PLAN AT SEVERN TRENT?

I'M JUST STARTING OUT – YOU CLEARLY HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF EXPERIENCE IN GAS PROCESSING. HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED SINCE YOU FIRST GOT INVOLVED?

WHERE ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES IN THE BIOTECH SECTOR FOR CHEMICAL ENGINEERS? DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE?

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON AT BECHTEL THESE DAYS?

examples are above.

People like to tell their stories and it's flattering to be asked; so ask away, but remember to listen and be ready to interject at a tactical moment, even if only to seek clarification – it shows you've been paying attention.

It's important to keep an open mind. Cast your net wide and try to move in different circles. If you are attending a conference or an exhibition with friends or colleagues, dump them at the door! You can always meet up with them later. Because when it comes to networking, if you are in your own company, you're in the wrong company and always remember that people you think you don't have much in common with could be great networkers themselves – and surprise you with how helpful they can be.

DON'T FORGET THE FOLLOW UP

Begin by thinking about the networks to which you already have access, including student alumni, family and friends. All are potential avenues for building useful contacts. But a word of warning; don't chase aimlessly after every networking opportunity

which comes your way. Instead try to find networks which already function well, such as IChemE, or have the potential to do so. Consider and decide which sort of groups and contacts will be most helpful for your aims and capabilities – always bearing in mind that you need to be able to help them, as well as they should be able to help you.

Finally, the most overlooked aspect of professional networking is the follow up. Don't waste the opportunities that you've worked hard for. Once a contact has been made, think about how it can be nurtured. Forwarding carefully-selected news articles, features and business intelligence is an easy way of doing this. Keep your relationship 'live' by sharing useful information. Always review business cards and notes after a networking event. Record any obvious or immediate follow-up actions, but also think long term. The network contacts that you make today may prove useful to you in ten years' time. And you will become useful too.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on professional networking, including advice on body language, 'reading' a room and more pointers on how to prepare yourself to get the best from a crowd of strangers, listen to the recording of Andy Furlong's recent webinar:

NETWORKING FOR PERSONAL AND BUSINESS SUCCESS
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