

Building professional networks: tips and tricks

Professional networks were defined as the set of connections or relationships with people who can influence your future opportunities and your likelihood of successfully taking advantage of those opportunities. Professional networks are then more about maximizing future opportunities than securing definite prospects. The following tips should be useful in building and strengthening your professional networks; keep in mind, though, that these are the result of pooled experiences of graduate students, not expert advice. For expert help, Career Services offers resources that can be of further help.

Finding people

- Attend department events
 - The more your face is seen, the more likely it will be remembered
 - Networking with fellow graduate students is also important; many of us have useful connections and access to opportunities, and practicing networking skills with peers makes using them with more senior academics easier
- TA, RA, grade, and do other things for multiple faculty
 - Having multiple relationships with faculty in the department is a great way to grow your network
 - Try not to spread yourself too thin though; a few strong relationship will probably be better than many weak ones
 - Diversity your skills and CV by taking on positions outside your substantive area
- Attend conferences and other professional meetings
 - When possible, spend time with your supervisor or other mentor at these places; they may be able to introduce you to someone important
 - Taking the time to briefly look up the speakers in sessions you attend is a good way to identify people to approach one-on-one – a quick look through their CV or recent publications in a database search is often sufficient; you don't need to become an expert, just be able to start them talking about their projects
- Volunteer in the community to broaden your network beyond academia; non-profit organizations and political campaigns are especially useful for this
 - This will greatly improve y our CV as well as make professional connections

Making first contact

- When someone you'd like to build a connection with is giving a presentation, write down questions or comments and bring them up one-on-one instead of during a question period after their presentation
 - This can help break the ice and will give you a way to stimulate a conversation – this is especially useful for people who fear they wouldn't be able to carry a conversation with an academic

- Social and networking events at conferences can be good places to track down somebody you'd like to introduce yourself to
- When approaching someone you don't know, open with something disarming, such as, "Do you have five minutes?"
 - Use their name (at least at the beginning and end of the conversation) and remember to introduce yourself
- Consider creating a profile on a professional networking website, like LinkedIn; this will give people you've met a place to learn more about you later
 - Business cards can also be useful in this way

Building relationships

- When TAing, RAing, collaborating, etc, do a good job and make your effort apparent
 - More than anything else, this is what supervisors, mentors, and colleagues will remember
- Always be friendly and professional
 - Though it may seem silly, practicing your smile (and making other expressions) in a mirror can help you feel more confident that your face conveys what you want it to
- Dress appropriately for the event
 - You don't always have to look formal, but you should always look clean and tidy
 - When in doubt, dress up instead of down – it's better to be the best dressed than the worst dressed in any situation

Keeping in touch

- Follow their work and email them with congratulations on awards received and publications accepted
 - Their departmental website, LinkedIn profile (if they have one), or quick database searches can be quick ways to find out if they have anything new
- Similarly, many mentors appreciate hearing about your successes – new publications are particularly easy to keep in touch about, because you can include a copy in an email
- Ask them for small amounts of advice or input
 - Anything from career advice to proofreading a short manuscript can be effective
 - Offering to include them as an author on something is a great way to maintain a relationship
- Depending on the relationship, meeting to "catch-up" (on current projects, family life, etc – again, depending on the relationship) can be a good way to maintain these relationships
 - This can be especially useful if you have moved away and are visiting the city they live in