

Networking Gone Bad

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I spend most of my days in meetings with graduate students and postdocs, talking about where their careers might go. I jokingly say, "Nobody leaves my office without a networking tutorial." And it's true: for Ph.D.s engaged in a nonacademic job search, the concept of networking is omnipresent and unavoidable. Countless resources and articles are available to help novice networkers learn the basics of networking, and everyone knows the best way to become a better networker is to just get out there and *network*.

But in the course of my many years providing career advice to Ph.D.s, I have seen intermittent instances of negative networking encounters -- that is, networking gone bad -- and want to give some cautionary advice to networking neophytes about how to deal with situations that are, to put it colloquially, icky.

I am not talking about formal interactions such as job interviews, internships or organized mentoring. I am instead referring to casual or informal exchanges of career-based information between two people -- usually one who is expert and one who is novice. My advice is intended to guide new networkers through responding to the occasional odd encounter with confidence.

Keep in mind that the types of situations I am referring to come to my attention about once a year among the hundreds of meetings I have with graduate students and postdocs. This is not typical networking, but the uncertainty and confusion these types of situations can cause for Ph.D.s who find themselves in them has had enough of an impact to make me want to share my thoughts with those who are just embarking on building up a circle of professional contacts and learning the nuances of connecting and communicating with new people.

So what exactly do I mean by "networking gone bad"? Generally, this is an instance when either party in the networking dyad feels uncomfortable with how the communication is progressing. Some examples:

- A female graduate student has been conversing over email and Skype about industry opportunities with a male alumnus in another city, who suggests they meet for dinner when he is next in town.
- A postdoc meets an industry executive at a trade association; they agree to meet one on one at the executive's office and discuss research ... at which point the postdoc's relationship status is queried.
- After a conversation during a cocktail reception at a conference, a professional suggests to a student attendee that they continue the conversation in a hotel room.

It may seem obvious to many reading these examples that they could lead to unsettling outcomes, but all the above are true instances that I have discussed with students and postdocs who weren't sure of what to do. Because those individuals were so new to the practices of networking, they didn't always clearly see the delineation between appropriate and inappropriate professional behavior. However, as the students and postdocs were the ones seeking information from a more expert "other," an implicit power dynamic was at play. In all these scenarios, the new networker was most worried about "losing" the other person, and his or her connections, and was willing to overlook potential bad behavior.

In many of the example encounters noted above, no illegal wrongdoing occurred. (And most women will have had some experience deflecting similar instances of unwelcome attention in their daily lives.) I have observed, however, that during the Ph.D. job search, those trainees unfamiliar with navigating the world of work can have an overarching feeling of anxiety about professional activities, which can lead to lack of clarity and confusion when communications are not progressing as they should be.

Here is the simple fact, new networkers: it is not worth it to continue communicating in awkward or uncomfortable situations. You will be able to find many other possibilities for career advice and information, so you should not

continue a conversation or a relationship (virtual, in person or otherwise) with anyone who makes you uneasy -- even if it means relinquishing some of your most well-connected, important and influential contacts.

If you are female, and the person steering a networking encounter into personal territory is male, find a woman in the company to connect with instead, especially if it's a larger company or industry. If the errant networker represents a small company or organization where you would have to interact with him or her should you eventually be hired there, turn your interest to a different firm, since the inappropriate personality could end up being your boss, or if he or she is very senior, will most likely dominate the company culture. Don't fret if you think that firm was the perfect match for your skills and interests -- if that person works there, it wasn't the place for you. He or she has absolutely no excuse for unprofessional behavior, especially if you have presented yourself as a student or recent graduate seeking advice and assistance.

Networking allows you to get an inside view of career choices, career culture and personalities; having both positive and negative glimpses of career reality can be a valuable advantage. So even if you must end what seems like a promising networking relationship because of awkwardness, you will have learned something (although probably not what you were expecting). When you are starting out in the process of building up your knowledge of an industry or occupation, you will most likely begin by reaching out to people you know, or who are known to people you know; then your interactions will eventually expand to strangers. Be prepared for the unknown, and remember there is no guarantee of success in connecting positively with all the people to whom you reach out.

Multiple situational variables will be a constant in your networking activity. That includes differences in individual personalities, different contexts and varied settings, as well as diverse understandings of professionalism and perhaps even cultural conflicts. You also may just come across a jackass or two, and as in the rest of life, move away from those people as quickly as possible.

Some final brief tips on avoiding or managing unpleasant networking situations:

- Recognize that social gatherings are a crucial part of the networking game, and may often involve alcohol. Perhaps ask to set up conversations at another time if you meet people who are a few drinks into a convention reception and to whom you'd like to continue talking, just not in a fog of potential inappropriateness.
- Keep in view of others. You can easily find places to have private conversations in a public setting. If you meet a great contact in a crowd and the suggestion is made to move to a quieter place to talk, don't freak out -- the person may only have the lobby in mind.
- Conduct written networking communication professionally. The best vehicles for that are via email or Skype and LinkedIn. You could create a new email account to use specifically for your career networking -- which makes sense for a number of reasons, not least of which is keeping your networking correspondence organized. Use Skype for phone conversations if you don't want to give your personal cell phone number.
- When meeting a new contact in person, choose professional, public settings such as an office or conference-center meeting room. A good overall rule: when meeting strangers or new contacts, use the same excellent judgment and intelligence that has allowed you to succeed as a Ph.D. researcher. Don't ignore your instincts.
- If awkward networking happens with someone you might see again, or will not be able to avoid, be as pleasant and professional as you can. Just as in an interview setting, you can respond with statements like, "I don't see how this relate to my questions about your career path," or "No, thank you, I'd rather talk about job opportunities."

Negative or awkward networking experiences certainly will not occur often, and may not ever happen to you. Don't let this discussion put you off the idea of informational interviewing or chatting with a stranger at your next conference. Just be conscious that networking can at times veer unexpectedly from the professional to the personal -- and know that you are able to exit those conversations and find better opportunities.

