How to Create and Keep a Useful Network

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August 7, 2017

This time of year has always been my favorite. Back to school once meant new clothes, new notebooks, and new hopes of avoiding the dreaded bottom locker. Now, as a professor, I retain the joy I have every August when I get new colleagues, new students, and yes, new clothes. Mostly though, I'm excited about the opportunity to start fresh and do a better job than I did the year before.

To begin that process, I revise and enhance my professional networks — because a new academic year should bring with it new relationships and new opportunities.

I confess that I am not "that" person who knows everyone, attends all the conferences, and has research partners at half a dozen institutions. On the contrary, I strongly dislike talking to strangers, do anything I can to avoid pseudo-intellectual banter, and, frankly, prefer to work alone. That's why it's all the more important that I have a strong and effective professional network.

To be clear, I am not talking about a group of friends you vent to after a bad day at work (although that's certainly necessary at times). I am talking about a network you can tap into for career advice, mentorship, and support — people who can do research or write grants with you, who have your best interests in mind, and who are positioned to help you achieve your goals. An effective network is especially important if you, like me, are in a small department at a small institution — or if your campus, like mine, is geographically separated from other major institutions.

Here are some ways to create and maintain a useful network.

Shape your digital identity. Networking is a lot like dating: The key is to make yourself attractive to like-minded individuals so that they want to be a part of your network. You should always have a professional website where you clearly describe your teaching and research interests. Somewhere on that website, you should link to other scholars' work so that it's clear you consider yourself a member of a community of scholars, and not a lone ranger on the path to academic domination. Include links to your own work so that readers can see what you have to offer as a potential collaborator or mentor.

If you have a professional blog (as opposed to a personal one where you post videos of your dog), link to it on your website and share your blog posts on social media. Join Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn to advertise yourself and to find out what other academics are up to. While I am not an avid tweeter, I do use it to link to recent blog posts and publications. I sometimes participate in planned conversations pertinent to my professional interests.

I am also a member of at least six Facebook groups for academics. Those groups are the most useful in learning about publishing and professional-development opportunities. Indeed, in the past six months, I've cowritten a chapter, been invited to participate in two symposia, and designed a multi-institution study — all with people I met in these groups. I also make sure I offer professional advice and share opportunities to my Facebook colleagues. For example, I recently posted about a job opening in my department. We ended up hiring a member of the group.

Go to conferences (even if you'd rather not). Social media is not enough to develop a useful professional network. You should attend at least one conference a year (preferably the major conference in your discipline) and, yes, go to some of the sessions. Be strategic in what you attend so that you have the potential to speak with people whose research is similar to your own. Keynotes and plenaries are fine, but they don't offer the same opportunity for one-on-one conversation as a paper or poster sessions. Come prepared with specific questions that go beyond what the presenters discussed. That demonstrates in-depth engagement and increases the likelihood that they will want to talk to you for more than 2 minutes as they rush off to their next session.

Even after the conference ends, your networking should continue. Attend workshops. Volunteer to review conference proposals, journal submissions, or grant proposals.

Some of your networking efforts will fail. Not everyone you meet will be a useful contact. Just because you meet a famous scholar does not mean that person will have anything of substance to offer you.

Everyone in your network should have a clear role, and those roles should have a purpose that is obvious and agreed upon. You might have a mentor (someone to provide general advice about your career path), an advocate (someone who will fight on your behalf), an ally (an empathetic person who shares your philosophical perspective), an extender (someone who can connect you to other people), and collaborators (people with whom you do professional work).

Importantly, choose people who've been successful in the roles in which you intend to place them. For example, if you need advice on grant writing, choose someone with a demonstrated record of federally funded work. If you are searching for a research partner, find someone with research interests that complement (not mimic) your own. Don't limit yourself to people with whom you are already familiar. Reach out across institutions, disciplines, ranks, and geographic locations.

Be persistent — within the bounds of civility. If you email a contact and don't get any response, consider calling that person's office (but don't keep calling if the answer is no). Be patient and compassionate while remembering that they, too, are busy academics, so silence is not necessarily a reflection of a lack of desire to work with you.

Pruning and upkeep. It's your responsibility to maintain your professional relationships, particularly the ones you initiated. Check in with people in your network regularly by email or phone. Your conversations don't have to be long or overly formal. Just send updates about your accomplishments, your research, and, if you feel comfortable, your personal life. Stay abreast of their professional lives and congratulate them on publications, promotions, and awards. Don't wait until you need something to contact them.

Recognize and respect that life happens, and relationships strengthen and weaken over time. If someone has had a birth or death in the family, it's probably not a good time to ask for a recommendation. Accept that someone on sabbatical may not respond to your email. Be willing to move people around in your network as your, and their, professional capacities evolve. In fact, be willing to remove people entirely from your network if the usefulness of the relationship has expired.

Indeed, pruning professional contacts can sometimes be more difficult than removing people from your personal life. Ending a professional relationship may, at best, spawn office gossip, and, at worst, affect your promotion and tenure. So when pulling the plug on people in your network, be respectful and grateful. Thank them for their advice/guidance/support — or just their time — and offer to return the favor, if and when you can in the future. *Never* burn a bridge, even if the relationship went sour.

Here are a few other things to remember when creating an effective professional network:

- Maintain a distinction between personal and professional relationships. While you will certainly have personal conversations with colleagues, always be clear about the primary nature of the relationship.

- Be genuine. Don't be a "user" who is only interested in getting to know someone because you think it will boost your career.

- Create a manageable network. Relationships take nurturing. Be ready to spend time interacting with each person in your network.

- When you contact people for professional support, be specific in your requests. Asking vague or broad questions puts someone in the position of having to ascertain your needs and help you.

- Utilize your professional skills in at least one community organization. Meeting people beyond academia is critical in creating a diverse professional network.

- Be thoughtful about how and when you use your network. Consider carefully if you want to call in a favor with a particular person. Is it worth it? Would it be better to save this person for an issue of more importance?

As you progress in your career, your network should get smaller — not bigger. That may seem counterintuitive, but as you start to learn your own professional strengths and weaknesses, you get better at determining what kinds of support you need. You also get busier, so there is less time to devote to maintaining a lot of professional relationships.

By the time you go up for tenure, you should have a pretty solid network of long-standing relationships. In general, use Years 1 and 2 to establish your network, Years 3 and 4 to refine it, and Years 5 and/or 6 to strengthen it. Once you are tenured, your attention will likely turn to navigating how to be a supportive member of others' professional networks. Turnabout is fair play.