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Networking for a Successful Career in Academia

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Academics like to look down their nose at colleagues who are committed networkers. But they fail to understand that connections are essential for a successful career in academia too.



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Being bright and studious is not enough to make it to the top of the career ladder. This not only applies to jobs in the private sector, but also to academic positions. Apart from performance and productivity, it is above all cooperation and network relations that determine the path of academic careers. About five years after having obtained a doctorate, it is no longer productive performance in the form of publications alone that decides whether an applicant will receive a professorship position. Being well connected and carrying out research in cooperative partnerships triples your chances of attaining a professorship. What rules apply for academic networking and what strategies of action have proven effective?

Building your network – a few rules of interaction

1. Never confuse networking with old boys networks

These are two entirely different things. Old boys' networks serve the purpose of getting certain people into very specific key positions, usually irrespective of qualification or performance. The two main aspects of old boys' networks are taking care of each others' interests and maintaining power. The whole system is a closed shop which from the outset is only accessible to a select few individuals. Networks, in

contrast, are based on voluntary collaboration and the principle of reciprocity. They luckily work in both vertical and horizontal direction.

2. Embrace the concept of giving and taking

Let others share in your successes and contacts. Give willingly, but not carelessly. Ask others for advice and support. And, most importantly, make sure to thank others when you have received help or information. Politeness, reliability and genuine appreciation are important factors in networking.

3. Give your network partners and yourself time to get to know each other

Good networks are not created overnight; they take time and need to be maintained and developed over the longer term. You should therefore start early with creating your network.

4. Do not leave your contacts up to chance; set yourself clear and realistic targets

This requires a little reflection on your own position. Where do you stand right now in your career and what do you want to achieve? What support might you need in order to do so? And don't forget: What do you have to offer in return?

5. Don't focus only on the highest level contacts

Horizontal contacts are just as valuable as vertical ones. When planning your network, consider your own qualifications and don't aim too high. As a doctoral candidate, it is extremely exhausting and often futile to independently attempt to enter into conversation with an important figure in your field at a conference. Interesting researchers never stand alone but are usually involved in conversations with others. It is better to try and make contacts with other doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers, and maybe you will be introduced by a colleague at the conference in the following year.

6. Concentrate on common goals and synergy effects

To successfully cooperate with somebody, you do not need to be great fans of each other or fully agree on your views of the world. Networks are based upon basic sympathies and esteem, but are not to be mistaken for cosy corners.

7. Work on your communicative and social skills

Networks function based on meeting other people and mutual exchange. The much vaunted emotional intelligence plays an

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important role here and determines the impression you make on your counterpart. Develop your communicative skills and learn to recognise the subtle differences between various types of conversation and situations. Become sensitive to the needs of others. Talk about yourself and listen carefully when others are telling you something.

8. Learning by doing

This rule is especially important for successful networking. Reading clever books about networking is not enough to develop a good network. Therefore, make use of every opportunity to enter into contact with your colleagues. Become a member of academic societies within your discipline. Attend presentations, conferences and colloquiums. Get involved in bodies and commissions at your university.

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