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How to Develop Successful Networking Skills in Academia

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This article is aimed primarily at those wanting to develop a career in academia although there will also be some useful general tips for those in other sectors interested in improving their networking skills.

It will cover:

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Why network? <>

Networking is the use of both formal and informal connections between groups of colleagues to develop your career. It is extremely common in the commercial sector where events to encourage networking have been prevalent for several decades now, and obvious tools to develop networks such as business cards are used by the majority of people who want to change or improve their career prospects. There is a huge number of networking advice sites for those in the commercial sector, for example:

http://www.canadaone.com/ezine/expert/expert39.html <http://www.canadaone.com/ezine/expert/expert39.html>

http://www.questcareer.com/networking_skills.htm <http://www.questcareer.com/networking_skills.htm>

In academia however, especially in the UK, most people have been much slower to adopt these techniques. This is partly because of a perception that it is too manipulative and commercial and will actually put others off rather than encourage liaisons. However, this is an erroneous view, and in fact networking on both a formal and informal level, personally and electronically is vital for any academic who wants to develop his or her career. Developing your networking skills will allow you to maximise opportunities such as conferences when you meet other academics. This is especially important for those in junior positions who hope to climb the career ladder.

Developing networks can help in the following career scenarios, among others:

job opportunities, perhaps you will be told informally of a job coming up and invited to apply for it;

job interviews or promotion boards, imagine that you already knew a member of the panel well and could understand what he or she was looking for; publishing articles or books, perhaps the scholar who has been asked by the publisher to peer-review your work recognises your name and is more likely to be sympathetic;

joint research projects, by publicising your name and interests, those who are in your field will find it easier to approach you and suggest collaborations.

As with your own social life, your career network will be formed of many different, sometimes overlapping groups, comprising for example of colleagues in your field, those in your own department or those who graduated from the same university.

Where do I start? <>

Getting to know fellow academics, especially more senior ones, can be very daunting. Lecturers and researchers are used to spending a lot of time in isolation working independently. The thought of going public and ‘selling yourself' does not seem enticing. However, it is easier than you think to begin to develop your own career-enhancing networks. Your PhD supervisor and examiners or if you are already in post, your mentor, are a great place to start. They will have been chosen to guide you because they are more experienced and in most cases they will work close to your field of interest. Ask their advice for ways of building up your own network of contacts. Also it is easier to approach someone unknown to you if you can mention the name of a mutual acquaintance.

If you are a postgraduate who is serious about a career in academia, or a more senior scholar wanting to develop one, you will surely be attending conferences on a fairly regular basis. There is no right or wrong number of these, some scholars stick to one or two a year, others seem to attend one a month! Conferences are *the* main way that academics network with each other, so do not miss out on these opportunities. If you are presenting a paper it gives others a chance to see what you are working on, and the informal sections of the programme (such as food and drink breaks) encourage mingling and further discussion.

Face-to-Face networking <>

It is easy to see why networking could be useful, but how do you actually make those connections. Part of this is simply being prepared to ‘bite the bullet' and go and talk to people. If you see someone at a conference whose work you know and you feel prepared to say a few sentences about how much you liked it or it influenced your own work, then go ahead and introduce yourself! Even the most eminent scholar is only human and will be excited to hear that he or she has affected someone else's thinking. It is always good to be prepared to say something concrete about a paper they have given or a particular argument they espouse, and of course be ready with a response when they turn the question back on you: ‘so what do you work on?' Other obvious discussions that get the conversation going include: comments about your university or theirs, a new job or book, or less ‘academic' matters such as whether either of you have visited that particular conference venue before.

Conference networking can feel like going through several mini-job interviews, it is an exhausting process but is made easier and more fun by the fact that it is usually informal and most people you meet will be sociable and likeable. Make sure you wear the name badge that is usually provided for you at conferences. This will allow others who recognise your name to come and speak to you.

Have a business card handy for moments like this. You will not have the chance to speak at great length to every person you meet, and you may want to discuss things further later. So make sure you give them a business card as it is easy to forget someone's name and institution if you are meeting many new people on the same day.

Electronic Networking <>

This is something that academics in many fields are new to, especially in the UK, although, increasingly, being a member of an online distribution list, chat room or a contributor to a blog can lead to the development of fruitful connections. As with any online activity, be aware of the security issues involved in giving out your real name, job details, address, academic interests etc. Online networking sites have a variety of formats, sometimes message boards allow you to post

information about, for example conferences or researchers looking for collaborators. An example of this is www.h-net.org <http://www.h-net.org/> which is an American-based site for those working in the Humanities. H-net also runs a large number of other 'communities' based around particular research topics. These can have anywhere from a small handful to a few thousand members. If you sign up you can receive email notification of a member's post, or visit the site regularly and read discussions there. One example is a community dedicated to researching the culture of South Carolina, called H-SC. Here is their mission statement:

'H-SC seeks to serve the community of scholars researching, preserving, teaching or learning about South Carolina history and culture. The list is a forum for reviews of books, announcements from archives, museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions about programming, research opportunities, research inquiries, public history, organizing conference panels, and discussion of significant themes on the Palmetto State.'

These sorts of networking communities can be used passively when you can simply view them as a source of news about your field. However, far more productive is to become an active participant, trying to answer other colleagues' questions and posting your own queries. Any particularly fruitful liaisons can be continued outside the remits of the community if you prefer, via 'private' email addresses or even by phone or in person. The benefit of electronic networking is that you do not have to worry whether the person is 5 miles away or 5000. Fruitful networks of scholars can be built up across the globe using this means.

Using your Contacts <>

Once you have made a connection with a group of people or an individual, how do you go about maximising your new network? You need to work out what your career development goals are and how each person can help you achieve those goals. The obvious career goals of an academic are:

-undertaking research projects

-getting research published

-developing your teaching portfolio

-moving to a new job

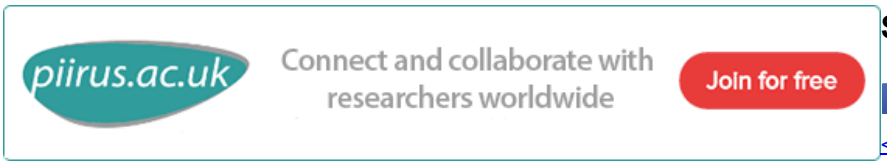
The contacts achieved while networking can help you do some or all of these. Scholars who have an interest in your field can advise you on the direction of your research, they may be able to help you apply for funding. If they are very senior, they might have influence with those who are deciding who is awarded funding! You may network with an editor of a journal or a reader for a publisher who can help you get your work published. Those colleagues teaching courses similar to yours will be able to suggest innovative teaching techniques as well as books they use that have been popular and those to avoid. In terms of applying for and getting a new job itself, your network might comprise people who know the institution where the job is advertised, be on the interview panel, have recently successfully gone for a job or even know a reason why that particular post is not as good as it sounds.

And everyone else out there will hope that you can offer them similar sorts of advice, so be prepared to share your pearls of wisdom if and when you acquire them. Also, some contacts do become genuine friends, so do not worry that you are all simply 'using' one another to get ahead in your career.

When Networking goes wrong! <>

There are hardly any circumstances in which networking can damage your career opportunities. The worst that will usually happen is that you spend a long time cultivating a connection only for that person to cut you dead when their circumstances change. However, as with any field, you will come across a few unscrupulous people so be cautious when discussing, for example, your ideas for research with those you do not know well. If your idea is unique and original and one that you have not had the opportunity to fully develop yet, keep it close to your chest. If you tell a large number of people about it, you may find that someone has stolen your idea and is publishing it themselves.

Also try to be polite and restrained at all times when networking. If you are lured into criticising, for example, your institution or your colleagues or your publisher, do not be surprised if this is soon reported back to them. In both face-to-face and electronic networking, as with a job interview, try to be positive and present yourself in the best possible light.



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About this Article

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Dr Catherine Armstrong is Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Loughborough. She has previously held positions at the University of Warwick, Oxford Brookes University and for six years was based in the Department of History, Politics and Philosophy at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her second monograph 'Landscape and Identity in North America's Southern Colonies 1660-1745' was published by Ashgate in 2013. She has also co-authored a textbook with Laura Chmielewski entitled 'Atlantic Experience: Peoples, Places, Ideas' (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and has published widely on early modern book history. Her previous jobseeking experience means that Catherine is in a great position to understand and offer her knowledge and experience to those developing an academic career.

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