

Breaking the Ice & Warming the Connection: Mingling to Succeed

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Why would you step out of your comfort zone to talk to someone you don't know or just barely know? You would do so because the benefits of mingling*—more commonly known as networking—are many. Potential mingling outcomes include all of the benefits listed below.

- An eventual job offer
- A job promotion and/or more positive performance evaluation
- Securing a more desirable project
- Transferring to a more desirable location
- Friendship and/or professional ally
- Mentorship
- Information sharing

For reasons within your control and/or beyond your control, not every mingling attempt will lead to a pot of gold. Although you may not know beforehand which attempts hold promise, you can maximize the benefits by practicing and mastering the art of mingling and eliminating any failure factors within your control. Factors you control typically relate to your preparation and your presence. Factors beyond your control relate to how you are received by the other party. For instance, if you meet someone whose personality and/or values clash with yours, it's okay to abandon that mingling attempt.

Things you should know as you build your network:

Networking takes time.

The benefits of networking do not emerge overnight. Many people need more than a positive first encounter to feel comfortable opening up to their resources. Therefore, give your new connections the opportunity to warm up to you; don't come on too strong in the beginning.

Networking, when done correctly, is tasteful.

Sincerity is important. Even if you are networking with a purpose (e.g., to find a job), you must present yourself genuinely in order to win the favor of the party you wish to help you. You can maintain your sincerity by 1) treating the mingling attempt as an opportunity for exploration and not placing too much expectation on whether the mingling attempt results in a benefit to you, and 2) truly taking an interest in what the other person is saying and being respectful at all times. If you are asking for help, you should preface the question with "would you have time?" or "would it be okay if?" or "do you know someone who is looking to hire someone with my kind of background?" When you preface questions in such a way, you improve your chances of receiving help because you are not abrasive toward your new acquaintance.

You've been networking your whole life

Networking is not reserved for salespeople. Everyone does it, but those who recognize its importance are more effective because they take it seriously. For example, if you are a student, consider all your friends, schoolmates, and acquaintances. All of these people are part of your network. You met them in class, at parties, through mutual friends, through student organizations, or by partaking in other common activities. The benefits you receive from this network include many of the following:

- You know who you want on a team project. You know who is not a slacker and the people whose strengths complement your weaknesses.
- You know who not only takes good notes but also will let you borrow them if you missed class.
- You know who knows about the best parties.
- You know who would be willing to give you a ride to get groceries or pick you up from the airport.
- You know who will sell their used textbooks to you.
- You know who will buy your used textbooks.

Your approach for building your current network can be used in your professional life too. If you know someone for each of the above, that's because it was important for you to notice these things about people. The same goes for your professional needs. Think about what you need professionally. For instance, if your goal is to find a job at your favorite company, you should ask around to identify a hiring manager.

Why networking is so important to your career

Contrast your thriving and vibrant school life with your ho-hum work life (or grad school life). In a work setting, it is easy to fall into the trap of working, working, working, and rarely poking your head out of your cubicle to say "hi" to your cubicle neighbor. While getting your work done is extremely important and essentially why you are paid, if you desire career success, networking is required. Consider the following questions:

- In the workplace, do you know where your resources are? If you were stuck on a particularly cumbersome or unfamiliar computer program, would you know who among your office neighbors could provide immediate assistance?
- Do you know whose strengths complement your weaknesses?

*We offer the term *mingling* for those who—consciously or unconsciously—place a negative association on the term *networking*. Please note that we use the terms interchangeably.

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- Do you know who makes the decisions on project assignments, training, and promotions?
- Do you know the internal processes of how one is considered for promotion?
- Do you know which projects are the most fun, interesting, and rewarding?
- Do you know which projects and bosses your colleagues try to avoid?
- Outside your company, do you know who is doing similar work as you? In the event something unforeseeable happens (e.g., you are laid off), would you be able to call this person to help you find another job?
- Outside your company, are you aware of the industry-standards for training, tuition-reimbursement, and salaries and what you can reasonably expect to receive from your company?

The answers to these questions are not written in your new hire manuals. *You learn all of the above information through talking and getting to know your network.* When you are new to the workplace, you will not have an established network like you had in school. Therefore, you will have to create another one. Similarly to how you grew your social network in college, you will meet your professional or company friends in training, through other colleagues, at conferences, at work-sponsored social events and happy hour, through professional organizations, and through other common activities, such as community service or intramural sports.

As a graduate student, you may be concerned with the following questions:

- Which professors specialize in which research programs?
- Who is the best advisor?
- Where can I find grant money?
- Which professional organizations should I join?
- Do any of my peers have similar academic interests to mine so that we can collaborate or co-author publications?

Graduate students need to establish a network too, even if you remained at your *alma mater*. Your fellow graduate students will be your professional peers after graduate school, regardless of whether you stay in academia or not. Don't pass up the opportunity to start building a professional network while you're in class, at a seminar or conference (see *Networking at a conference*, following), or in your research lab.

Networking can be fun and easy!

There are just two basic steps to networking.

1. Initiation: Breaking the Ice.
2. Maintenance: Following Up & Reciprocation.

Step 1: Initiation. Initiation involves identifying who you want to contact, why you want to contact him or her, and how to prepare for the first contact. You can prepare yourself by treating a potential meeting like an informational interview (see the Winter 2007 BENT featured article on "Informational Interviews" at www.tbp.org/pages/publications). For instance, if you plan to talk with someone who may be able to help you find a job, you should be prepared to share some stories about your passions and goals. What interests you personally and professionally? Which of your traits will you use on the career path you've identified? If you are clear about your strengths and communicate them in a sincere way—neither boastful nor too modest—the other party could respond quite positively. Sometimes, the person you talk with will be able to offer you invaluable assistance. Your responsibility is to tell the stories that will trigger the person's memory about a potential resource for you.

But how do you *actually* start the conversation and break the ice? Starting the conversation with a stranger or someone in a position of power can be intimidating, and the appropriate strategy depends on your situation. The following are a few examples and what to do in each scenario. The goal for breaking the ice is to find something in common with the other person, because a shared interest or value can greatly facilitate bonding. Depending on your circumstance, breaking the ice may not be so relevant because what you have in common is obvious (e.g., you work for the same company, or you both joined the running club because you enjoy running).

Networking at work: Professional allies can play a huge role during your performance evaluation because your peers may be asked to contribute to your evaluation and may have more of a say than you think in whether you are promoted. A good way to get to know individuals and find potential mentors at work is to solicit your boss for a list of his/her colleagues who would be good resources for you. Then, set up lunch with each of these individuals by sending a friendly email or leaving a voicemail. Over lunch, be prepared to talk about your current projects and some of your previous work experiences. Don't be afraid to talk about non-work issues as well because the more things you can find in common with the other, the better your bonding. This is a good opportunity to learn about your colleague's background as well.

Networking at a conference: Conferences are great networking opportunities for both professional and graduate school students. At conferences, you will meet like-minded individuals and share your expertise with others. If you are not sure whom to approach, try a speaker you enjoyed. Right after the workshop, you can introduce yourself, thank the speaker for sharing about their topic, offer your comments, and ask additional questions.

If you are comfortable and qualified, volunteer to present a topic at the conference. By doing so, you will attract others to network with you. Other participants may approach you immediately after the talk or later on because they recognize you. Sometimes, you will be given a unique nametag or badge identifying you as a presenter, which is also a way for others to initiate a conversation with you. Another benefit to volunteering is that you will have communicated with a coordinator prior to your arrival and will know someone, at least by email, before you get there. Having a coordinator as part of your network can be most advantageous because that coordinator is in touch with many others and can introduce you to fellow volunteers and speakers.

Networking at a dinner party, happy hour, meeting, or event: A simple introduction of your name and a handshake may suffice. Also, be observant of who is wearing a nametag that either indicates the name of a company you know about or shows the position or title of this person. You can say something obvious, such as “I see you work for XYZ Company,” or “I see you are the president of JKL Professional Organization.”

Networking at an airport: You can network anywhere. At an airport, an easy way to start a conversation with someone is to observe what the other person is reading (a book or magazine about which you are familiar) or wearing (business suit, class ring, baseball cap that has the name of a sports team you know about or the name of your *alma mater*). Usually, these visual clues provide hints about the person. If he or she is wearing a T-shirt or cap with the name of your *alma mater* on it, you can ask, “Did you go to ABC University too?” and start the conversation that way.

After the conversation is initiated, be flexible about where the other person takes it. You may feel like you are doing a lot of small talk, but small talk is a necessary *evil* in bonding and establishing a connection. If you are not confident about carrying a conversation, you can refer to our “Informational Interviews” article mentioned previously for sample questions. Without fail, the very least you will get out of your mingling attempts is information. If you ask good informational interview questions, you will increase the likelihood of receiving good information in return.

What happens after the conversation has run its course? Remember to close or exit your mingling attempt with grace. If you wish to continue discussions with your new acquaintance, leave on a good note. Express how you enjoyed meeting the person, and, if appropriate, thank the person for their time. Ask if it would be okay for you to contact him/her again. If the answer is yes, ask for a business card or write down the other person’s information and offer your card, if available.

Step 2: Maintenance. Within the next 48 hours, you should write your new acquaintance a short email about the encounter. This is important to do even if you do not have follow-up questions yet because this opens the door to future communication.

If you wait until you think of a question to make your first contact, your contact may have forgotten about you already. You should check with your new acquaintance approximately once a month and suggest lunch or another meeting, if appropriate.

A final note.

Networking relationships should be beneficial to all parties. Although benefits may be more tangible for some parties, the other party must not feel duped or used over the course of mingling. Oftentimes, people enjoy helping others, and a simple “thanks” may be sufficient satisfaction to continue a relationship. However, other times, people may expect a return favor. Under these circumstances, as long as the return favors requested are reasonable, you should be prepared to reciprocate. If you do not, you will run the risk of developing a reputation for using people, and others may be less willing to help you out or will keep a distance when you attempt to reach out to them.

Networking, if put to good practice, can be incredibly rewarding. Have fun meeting new people!

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