

# Building and Maintaining an Effective Professional Network

by Scott E. Fable, California Tau '96, and Jengyee Liang

**O**ur Spring 2007 article discussed the importance of networking and focused on how to initiate conversations. However, you may be wondering still about some of the following:

- Where are the best places to network?
- How do I best use my time when in a room full of people?
- How do I best keep in touch with my network?
- How do I best use my network?

## Where are the best places to develop my professional network?

While you were in college, you developed the beginnings of a professional network, perhaps without realizing it. When you wanted help in a class, needed job search advice, or just wanted to hang out, you looked to the people and resources you knew for support: classmates, friends, professors, and co-workers. This is your “network.”\*

What happens, then, when you leave the campus and venture into the world? Just as you did in your transition from high school to college, once in a new environment, you start to build your network again, while maintaining contact with some of those from before. The hard part is that your new environment is populated with strangers, and the networking that was so intuitive by the end of your college experience is once more a challenge.

In general, the kind of interaction you have with friends and others you know well is built on shared experiences and interests. So, emulate this when you expand your network: use your interests to your advantage, and try to find something in common with others you meet. Improve your chances by participating in organizations or settings centered about your interests. Consider the following sources for building (or rebuilding) your professional network:

- Professional societies/organizations—groups such as ASME, IEEE, SWE, and, of course, Tau Beta Pi, offer opportunities for volunteering, conferences, and local meetings/socials.
- Alumnus groups—look up alumni in your area.
- Workplace—get to know project teammates, co-workers, and former colleagues.
- Professional development—improve your public speaking (e.g., Toastmasters), sign up for professional training, or enroll in community-college courses.
- Community groups/local government—apply to a city commission/committee, visit a Chamber of Commerce meeting, join Rotary, etc.
- Online networking sites—besides the obvious social sites, try *LinkedIn* or those offered through your campus alumnus groups.
- Friends—look up old friends, and form some new friendships.

## One caveat regarding online networking:

Online networking is not the ideal way to build a network, but it can be a great way to help you organize contacts that you’ve met already. How receptive are you to receiving email from an unsolicited stranger? Have you ever forgotten to reply to someone’s email because you honestly were too busy at the time? These are the issues that you would encounter in an online networking situation to build your network. If you contact someone who looks interesting online, you are a stranger to them, and, by the nature of that person not knowing you, your message may get lost or ignored among many higher priority emails.

## Do I have to talk to everyone there?

For some, actively networking with a room full of strangers means engaging in shallow and insincere conversations. Upon further analysis, proper networking is neither. Imagine that you are faced with a prime networking opportunity: a room full of people. Rather than feeling—or perhaps, dreading—that to be a good networker, you must meet every person there, take a strategic approach. Do not simply talk to everyone. Instead, ask yourself, what’s the topic or occasion of this meeting? What is your interest in this area? Use these as your starting point.

Begin your mingling with a statement about your interests and follow with a question—thus offering others a chance to share what they know. Have your interests and follow-on question already prepared, so you can get your point across quickly. For example, if you are at a meeting about renewable energy, you could start with “I’ve been looking to find out more about solar energy and its future potential in the residential market. What do you think is the market potential for solar power in the near future?” This brief introduction of your interests sets the topic for the conversation and ends with a broad question that invites more than a one-sentence answer.

Always show interest in the people you approach—generally, people enjoy talking about themselves when given a receptive audience. When the conversation has run its course—or the conversation isn’t holding your interest—allow yourself to move on to another person or group. Be courteous and tactful as you leave—you can always ask for a business card as a prelude to excusing yourself. Then, just ask if you can email or call if you have any additional questions. *(continued next page)*

*\*Networking can be a sensitive subject. That is why we offered the term “mingling” as an alternative in our last article. Unfortunately, whether or not you can look beyond the negative connotations of networking, networking is the most popularly accepted term.*

### How do I stay in touch with everyone in my network?

Just as you should not force yourself to talk to every person in a room of strangers, neither should you force yourself to keep in touch with everyone you meet. You must be selective with whom you keep in touch for several reasons:

1) The relationship should be beneficial to *both* parties, or it will not last. If you sense that this person may not be helpful to you, consider how valuable your time (and hers) is. Do not waste time on a contact that is not going to be rewarding for either or both parties.

2) Networking is about quality of interactions. If you spend a lot of time on unworthy contacts, you are taking time away from the contacts that truly matter.

As you move through your career, it's easy to maintain a relationship with those contacts you see regularly, such as classmates, co-workers, and nearby friends. As jobs change and people move, previously easy-to-maintain contacts may become challenging. You can still stay in touch by phone, online, or the occasional visit, but what if you're the one who's moved on? When we change environments—such as graduating from college and starting a job or graduate program—it's hard to keep all of our contacts from the previous setting intact. Suddenly, staying in touch with everyone you know could be a full-time job in itself! So, be strategic.

When you make a connection with someone whom you'd like to keep in your professional network, follow up with a short message or inquiry. You may not meet again, but, if you had an interesting conversation, you can continue it online. The point here isn't to create a friendship around a single conversation—you just want to leave the door open for future communication.

For maintaining long-standing contacts, you may not need to keep regular contact, but think of those with whom you would definitely like to stay in touch, and consciously set a goal to stay in touch. This could be an email once a month, a call every two weeks, or a visit every year. The point is to maintain some sort of regular contact.

One way to maintain contact with several distant friends simultaneously is to create a blog or email newsletter about what's going on in your life and send this to your list of friends and those who might be interested. Invite them to post/respond. Although this may seem impersonal—and only a few friends may actually respond—at least they have heard from you. Then, when you reach out to them personally, it will seem like you have, in fact, stayed in touch all along.

Why go through all this trouble? It's possible that several

months down the line, you may have a question for your contact, or perhaps you'll be looking for a job and would like to spread the word. If you have maintained occasional contact with those in your network, you will have that many more resources to draw upon. If it has been a year or more since they last heard from you, they're not as likely to have the motivation to help.

### How do I properly make use of my professional network?

The reward for properly building and maintaining a professional network is that when you have a need, your contacts' support can make your job and life easier. Sometimes you'll even find that a seemingly impossible task becomes dramatically easier by seeking insight from just a few contacts.

This is because your contacts have contacts of their own, and, when you have a question or need, you have a whole team of people helping you—just by asking the question. Of course, you want to use your contacts wisely—asking constantly for advice or ideas can tire even your closest contacts. So, consider the following ways to make proper use of your network.

#### During transition...

Suppose you are embarking on a career change—this includes transitioning from undergraduate to full-time employee or even to full-time graduate student. If it's been a while since your last transition, you may have forgotten the stress and uncertainty surrounding the process. Why not ask someone who has been through the process recently or currently holds the kind of position you want? For instance, suppose you know someone in a position at a company you like. Rather than calling up and asking for a job—just let her know you're in the job market, what you're looking for, and ask for advice. Be sure to ask if she knows of any good contacts, and let her take it from there. She may direct you to someone in the organization or may

surprise you and give you an even better lead outside the company (see our "Informational Interviews" article in the Winter 2007 issue of THE BENT for more tips).

#### When looking for a mentor...

Perhaps you'd like a mentor—someone who can offer tips and strategic advice on how to conduct a job search or thrive at your new company. A mentor can also offer you a long-term view of what options to pursue as you move through your career. Mentors can be found formally—say, through an alumnus group at your *alma mater*—or informally, through contacts you make at your current place of employment or through your professional network. You don't need to keep



*Your contacts have  
contacts of their own.  
You access a whole  
team by asking just  
one question.*

a mentor for any particular length of time, but, if you would like a formal mentoring relationship, you should make sure that you are both clear from the start about communication, expectations, and how long the relationship will last.

### Stumped at work...

Sometimes you may just need some extra information or contacts to help complete a project. Contacts in your professional network can help identify experts and resources that can help you make further progress than you would on your own. This isn't cheating—as long as you're willing to acknowledge your methods, you're simply making the best use of your resources to get the job done.

In this way, your network can enhance your skill set—putting you in touch with information and access to resources that might otherwise remain closed. Like any other skill set, it also takes practice and time to develop fully. If you are reluctant or uncomfortable building your network, start small, in familiar/structured settings. As you become more comfortable with your mingling and network development skills, then branch out and try it out in occasions that seemed inhibiting before.

Best of luck!

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### Why does networking matter?

A friend recently confided that she really didn't like "networking"—she simply didn't enjoy talking to strangers because it made her uncomfortable. Other friends have related that they hated networking because it seemed shallow and insincere—to them, it meant talking to other people simply to find out who they know and how they can help you, without taking any genuine interest in them.

Unfortunately, this narrow view of networking limits these friends' ability to engage in positive networking opportunities—that is, communicating with people in a sincere and meaningful way that can be mutually beneficial. It's ironic, because, without realizing it, they really are networking (in the positive sense of the word) all the time. As they interact with people throughout the day—friends, instructors, co-workers—they are constantly building and maintaining their network of contacts. Some interactions are purely social, some are professional (here we include any school work under "professional"), and some are a mix of the two. Because the environment and people are familiar and the interaction is handled intuitively, we often forget that these everyday interactions are still considered networking.

Then, why the hang-up on the term "networking"? As a professional engineer—or whatever career path you end up following—knowing a variety of other professionals offers exposure to personal and professional development opportunities, job leads, and information that would otherwise remain unknown to you. While in school, it is easier to locate these things, as the campus offers a high concentration of resources and people willing to help. After school, locating these opportunities requires more personal initiative. Building and maintaining a strong professional network will help.

If you still aren't convinced or would like more information on how to network properly, please refer to our article in the Spring 2007 issue of *THE BENT*.