

Grad Student Advice Series: How To Network and Add Value To Yourself and Others

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Part 1: The Dire Need to Network While In Grad School or Academia

It's Not What You Know It's Who You Know That Matters

Why is networking so important? Well, the short answer is that it all depends on what your objectives are. For example, some people network to expand one's resources, learn about potential opportunities and collaborations, answer questions, discuss current research topics, build relationships, learn from other people's failures or experiences, establish yourself as an expert in your field, **add value to others** (I'll explain this later), and/or other personal reasons such as business or entrepreneurial ventures.

Those who are in academia and choose to network with those in industry, may even help [bridge the gap](#) between academia and industry which has many added benefits. The bottom line is that networking is extremely valuable and you never know what opportunities might arise.



A common misconception is that networking only serves one purpose: finding employment. This will be covered more in detail in my [Ebook](#) or Part 2 of this series. However, a survey conducted by the Science Advisory Board (www.scienceboard.net) revealed that networking is by far the most successful means of finding employment. Networking is responsible for 90% or more of finding employment, whereas cold resume submission has been reported as low as only 4-10%.

If that 90% isn't a good incentive for you to **step out of your comfort zone**, then this is your wake up call.

Some working professionals who already have an established career stop networking because they no longer see the need. No matter what situation you are in, you should NEVER stop networking. You never know when it will pay off.

Graduate School "Tunnel Vision"

For graduate students in particular, the need to network becomes even more obvious. As a graduate student, not only did you make the decision to go get an advanced degree, but you made a decision to increase your chances of landing a better job. Without networking this chance is dramatically diminished.

For example, a lot of PhDs in the sciences will spend five to six years on average working in a research lab. During that time, **the majority typically network very little**. Many are afraid to step out of their comfort zone or they lack confidence. Some find themselves caught up in fear or making the excuse that it takes too much time.

Another excuse is that one's particular field doesn't require networking or good communication skills. One major downside of graduate school is that a graduate student may get "tunnel vision." **Tunnel vision is when a graduate student gets so overly-focused on his or her thesis topic** that he or she doesn't

devote any time to other things other than finishing the degree.

Although the end-goal is to graduate in the fastest possible time, it is **meaningless if you are unemployed and with a degree that you aren't even putting into good use**. You finally got your degree yet you don't even know how you're going to use it. Next comes the traditional post-doc. Or does it?

The Problem With Taking On A Post-Doc and Not Networking

A post-doc is a good option for those who want to stay in academia or broaden their skills as a scientist and want to continue their love for science. If you want to stay in academia, the need to network might not seem as prevalent or important. However, for those who want to go into industry, **there is a cross-over you will have to make**: Academia into industry. The need to network is greater than if you were just switching into a different lab and remaining in academia.

I will point out that just because you are a fifth year post-doc for example, this doesn't entitle you to a job and it certainly doesn't exclude you from having to network. But the real question is: Is a post-doc even necessary? Depending on what you ultimately want to do as a career, the [answer is ultimately up to you](#).

But I will also point out that **50% of Graduating PhDs end up doing a "traditional" post-doc upon graduation**. Some even enter [Industrial Post-Docs](#) (although this is a road less traveled). Of that 50% how many are landing tenure positions? Not surprisingly, only 14 percent of those with a PhD in biology and the life sciences now land a coveted academic position within five years (according to a 2009 [NSF survey](#)). Do you see a problem here? Most will look the other way or ignore the problem.

It is no wonder we have a so-called "[post-doc crisis](#)," which is when a newly minted PhD ends up taking a traditional post-doc, then ends up spending an average of four or more years at one post-doc. What happens after the first post-doc? They end up doing a second post-doc and never end up with a "real" job until much later. Or worse. They remain a post-doc, come to their senses about the poor job prospects, and enter industry, government, or [sadly leave the field altogether](#). Can the "post-doc crisis" be prevented through the benefits of networking? The answer is YES.

Another important question here is: [Where do the other 50% go?](#) Careers in discovery research, preclinical research, bio/pharmaceutical product development, and clinical development may require post-doc experience. However, other careers in industry such as project management, medical or regulatory affairs, quality and operations, business and corporate development, sales, marketing, technical applications and support, corporate communications, law, executive leadership, consulting, or finance may require a totally different kind of experience and you most likely do not need a post-doc as a stepping stone.

No matter what your career goals are, the need to network is imminent.

Some companies may require post-doc experience, but networking will give you an edge either way. Networking serves two important purposes. First, it can educate you (see [informational interviews](#)) by allowing you to talk to others in the field and learn about potential career opportunities and options. From this, you may realize that you don't want to be stuck at the lab bench anymore based on information that was shared and learned. You may even realize that you want to take your career in a totally different direction.

Maybe you can't see two steps or even five years ahead in your career, but networking may just help you and add immense value. Maybe you want to do one post-doc as you see the benefits and it fits with your goals and career objectives, but then leverage your network to land a good job. However, the second benefit of networking is that it allows you to skip the post-doc altogether. Either way, networking allows you to transition away from a post-doc.

To get around Graduate School or even Post-Doc "Tunnel Vision" **you have to make an effort to**

dedicate your time to networking. Even once a month is better than nothing. Many graduate students (and post-docs) who work in research labs won't even leave their lab building for lunch. Just think if you met a network contact once a month. How about once a week? Your network isn't going to grow by staying in lab in seclusion.

I Understand That Networking Is Important But I'll Worry About It Later.

If you have said or thought this in the past you need to change your way of thinking. Now. Graduate school and the poor job prospects in academia can throw you curve balls. You can have personal issues, your lab can lose funding, or you may find out that it's not for you. If you network early on and keep networking throughout graduate school or beyond it, you have strategically created opportunities and built personal relationships. This may play a huge role and have unmeasured benefits upon completion of your degree or in your future career.

Effective Networking Is A Learned Art

Don't expect to become an expert on networking right away. In fact, it is a skill that needs to be developed over time. So what can you do to build your network? Again, don't get used to just sitting at your desk all day and in front of a computer. Nothing beats face-to-face interaction and making personal connections. This is exactly why an online marketer is at a disadvantage (especially using social media). Keep in mind, half of networking is just showing up.

10 Ways To Effectively Network

1. **Talk to your professors.** Chances are they know people (or have past lab members) within and outside of academia. Preferably talk to the professors (ie the ones who run their own company) who are well connected and can introduce you to those people in industry that have transitioned away from academia. Get the names of those individuals. Email or call them and set up a time to meet. Then, do an **informational interview** (#4) with that key contact. From there, ask to be introduced to other people that they might know and it will spiderweb and create an endless network.
2. [Attend live networking events or "happy hours"](#).
3. Go to scientific conferences.
4. Start doing more [informational interviews](#) via introductions through LinkedIn or branching out from your existing network (the higher you aim position-wise, the better your chances will be for establishing a network that branches out).
5. Attend career fairs, product shows, recruitment events, seminars, etc.
6. Connect with someone who is established or is much better at networking than you and who can connect you with working professionals. Or better yet, connect with someone who [can teach you effective ways to network](#).
7. Audit classes on campus. If you are a science person, then take a business class and start networking with business professors and MBA students. If not business, find a secondary interest and step out of your comfort zone.
8. [Talk to those interested in entrepreneurship and possibly starting their own company](#). Chances are you will learn about what drives you, others, and you may just come up with the right idea that could



lead to a successful business.

9. If you can't do face-to-face interviews, connect with that distant (interesting) person over the phone. Chances are they may be in your area on business sometime in the near future and they will contact you to meet face-to-face. This also expands your network beyond your own local area.
10. Give presentations, be a guest speaker, and put yourself out there. The more you step out of your comfort zone the more you will find new networking opportunities! And this can lead to yet even more opportunities!

Some Key Things To Remember

Understanding what networking is NOT is just as important as knowing why you should be networking.

- Networking is **NOT about selling your products or services**. Your objective is to build a relationship or connection with that person. Ease up about having to sell yourself, and make sure you keep an open mind. You never know who might be a potential business partner, referral, or your future employer.
- Networking is **NOT about selling you**. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't prepare for a quick introduction for the common question "So.. What do you do?", but it shouldn't be rehearsed or over-practiced. Do not dominate the conversation and bore the person with only talking about yourself. Show sincerity and focus on adding value.
- Networking is **NOT about just finding employment**. Remember it's all about **adding VALUE to others**. If it just so happens you do end up finding employment, then great. But this should not be your main objective. This means you have started networking for the wrong reasons: To only add value to yourself and no one else.

So what SHOULD you do?

1. Get comfortable talking about what you do (you should be able to sum this up in no more than 30 seconds) and with speaking to a total stranger. That means practice your elevator pitch.
2. Have a casual conversation that adds value to that person.
3. Make a definitive plan with at least 3 people to have a follow-up meeting. That means having lunch, coffee, or seeing them at the next meeting or event (you can even invite them ahead of time if you're going).
4. Get to know the organizers and those who plan events.
5. Ask to be a presenter or speaker at a future meeting (such as [Biotech Happy Hour](#)) or on-campus event.
6. Position yourself as an expert in your niche.
7. Seek out potential business or academic partnerships.
8. Expand your network! Ask to be introduced to other key contacts this particular person might know (LinkedIn works great for introductions). The network is endless and you can go as far as you like.

Plan Before And After Each Event

Make sure you have a plan for what your objectives are before attending a particular event. Obviously, do your research ahead of time. What do you want to get out of attending this event? If you aren't defining your objectives



ahead of time, you may just waste time or money of that particular groups' objectives because they are not in-line with your own business or personal goals. Avoid this pitfall and mismatch.



After the event, make sure you **FOLLOW UP**. Especially with the people you said you would follow up with. You exchanged business cards remember? Don't let more than a week go by without making contact, otherwise it will show you were not engaged. Show them that you serious and you value their time by further establishing a sincere personal connection.

Schedule time to follow up. Do phone calls or emails. You need to set aside a specific amount of time to do this each week. Why? You need to get the most out of your networking efforts! Not just waste them. The whole point to a follow-up is to maintain that connection and add value to each other.

Conclusions

By building your network, you are increasing your net worth. People will begin to see you as an authority in your particular niche. It will gain you credibility and respect. Most importantly, they will see the value that you have to offer. You're not just another face in the crowd.

Keep networking consistently and do this in order to build yourself or your particular brand. The beauty of networking is that the more you do it, the more comfortable you'll be talking about WHO YOU ARE and WHAT VALUE YOU HAVE TO OFFER.

Increase your net worth and you may just find that future start up company or [job in industry](#) not too far off. You never know WHAT can happen. The possibilities are endless. So what are you waiting for? Get out there and start Networking!!

Further Reading

If you want to learn more, my Ebook will release sometime in 2013. I want to truly help grad students or post-docs boost their net worth and their networking skills. Therefore, the book is FREE. I am going to share my experiences and hardships and what I did that truly saved my PhD. **Had I not started networking in Jan of 2012, I would have no direction, goals, seemingly low net worth, and I would lack confidence of how I could add value to others.**

From teaching myself and stepping out of my comfort zone, I created a network out of thin air and built [200+ connections on LinkedIn](#) in under 6 months. I used LinkedIn and informational interviews as one method, but also built my network (in both academia and industry) through means as outlined above. Either way, I hope I can add value to graduate student's (or post-docs) who need to network, allowing them to look towards their future with optimism. Happy networking!



