

The Importance of Networking

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Depending on your perspective, building a professional network can be an enjoyable experience or can feel like an excruciating exercise in forced socialization. Regardless of how you view it, networking is one of the most important aspects in the job searching process. Throughout this article, you'll learn the "What's," "Why's," and "How's" of networking.

What a Professional Network Is and Isn't

Your network includes anyone who you've interacted with in a professional manner or setting. This can include the pharmacists and technicians you work with in the community or hospital setting, someone you've worked with or shadowed during an advanced or introductory pharmacy practice experience, and even your peers and professors who you've interacted with in the classroom.

It's important to differentiate though that having someone in your professional network is very different than shadowing or working with them. Your network is the group of individuals who you've developed meaningful enough connections with that you can rely on them when you're in need. More importantly, your network also knows they can rely on you when they're in need.

But developing a network represents more than just exchanging favors. Deep, meaningful human connection with people of similar professional backgrounds can pay dividends in other ways.

Why Do I Need a Professional Network?

There are so many reasons to build a professional network! Here are just a couple:

Your network can open doors for you

This is maybe the most obvious benefit of networking. As you form connections, each link in the network can be an extra lifeline as you begin your job search. The people in your network can write you strong letters of recommendation and coach you as you prepare for interviews. They can suggest areas of practice you didn't even consider. They may even be the person you end up working for. Think about it this way – if the hiring manager of your dream job is a close connection within your network, what do you think that means for your chances of getting that job?

Your network will help you be a better pharmacist

Your network will push you to be better and encourage you to explore new things. You'll engage in meaningful professional dialogue that introduces alternative viewpoints you hadn't considered. You can use these ideas to educate patients and others in your network or even use them as talking points in an interview.

Your network will make your career more fulfilling

When you are a part of a network of individuals with similar, overlapping professional responsibilities, you immediately have something in common with everyone you speak to. Understanding that you face similar challenges allows you to brainstorm ideas to develop creative solutions. It gives you someone to vent to who truly understands what you're going through.

You won't be "alone" at professional meetings

Having a network also means that you'll see many of the same people at different networking events and professional conferences. It's always helpful to see a familiar face among a crowd that you can have coffee or a meal with. When you attend the same conferences year after year, each time will feel like a reunion, as opposed to a series of educational sessions that you could have done from your computer at home.

How to Develop Your Network

Lean into the uncomfortable – Approach people you normally wouldn't. Prepare in your mind what you're going to say if it doesn't come naturally to you! A good introduction can be as simple as leading in with a handshake and saying, "Hi, I'm [insert your name here]." Of course, that seems basic, but it works because it's so simple. If it helps, bring a friend with you! Having a second person can help with the awkwardness of an initial conversation.

Set yourself a goal – Maybe leaning into the uncomfortable is a bit too much of a hurdle. That's okay! Make the hurdle more manageable by setting a realistic goal to meet one new person at a professional meeting. Some conferences have thousands of attendees – meeting someone new isn't going to be too challenging. Maybe it's someone you're sitting next to in an education session, a mutual connection with someone else you know, or someone you've matched up with through a networking program (see below).

Participate in networking programs – Professional organizations recognize the value of networking, especially for student members who are working toward getting into the fields of practice they represent. For this reason, organizations often offer programs that pair an existing, established volunteer member with a newer member (e.g., a student or recent graduate). This takes a lot of the stress out of leaning into the uncomfortable because you know the person you've matched up with is interested in networking and mentoring you. Take advantage of these programs any chance you get!

Reach out online – Maybe the in-person approach is a bit too daunting for right now. Don't worry, that's totally normal! Until you get comfortable, maybe an initial online connection is a better way to get started. A quick direct message introducing yourself and the reason you're reaching out can easily open a door to forming a new connection. If the recipient isn't open to it, oh well. You don't want people in your network that don't want to be there.

Ask others about themselves – Professionals are very open to others who show genuine interest in learning about the work that they do and their career paths. Larry King once wrote, "Talk to

people about themselves and they will listen for hours.” This quote tells us something that we all inherently know – people love to talk about themselves. I don’t mean anything negative by this, it’s just human behavior. So, use this to your advantage to learn how you can make it in the field they’ve found their way in.

Listen when others speak – It’s not enough to just ask someone about themselves, you also have to be sincerely interested in learning about them. With this sincere interest, you’ll be more engaged in the conversation and the individual will remember you and the conversation in a more positive light.

Don’t feel intimidated – I recall a time that I was reviewing a new medication for a rare disease, but the information online was too limited to really understand the value of the drug. I reached out to various specialists to try to learn more and in a matter of minutes, I received an email from a renowned physician who had published numerous papers on the topic. Since I had only been in practice for a few years at the time, “intimidated” wouldn’t be a strong enough word to describe how I was feeling. However, within the first few minutes of the call, I realized something about networking that I previously hadn’t – no matter the credentials or the accolades, the person on the other side of the conversation is just another human being. Maybe they’re at a different point in their career, but they were, at some point, where you are now. More importantly, they haven’t had the exact same experiences you have. So, remember that you bring value to the conversation and the person you’re connecting with is lucky to be in your network too.

Keep in touch – The most important part of building a network is maintaining your relationships. You have to be purposeful about following up with the people in your network. It doesn’t have to be daily or even monthly, but you need to keep your relationships fresh. Keep the conversations going, but don’t force it. Let the conversation flow naturally.

Connection Inertia – If someone in your network is chatting casually with someone you haven’t met, don’t hesitate to introduce yourself. You have a mutual connection and, unless they are locked in on a serious conversation, your connection will introduce you and your list of contacts will continue to grow. The larger your network, the faster it will grow!

A few final points to remember about networking:

- **Make your network what you want it to be.** Everyone has a different definition of what a professional network is. The important thing is to visualize what *you* want to get from your network. Don’t compare your network to others’.
- **You’re not going to be best friends with everyone in your network.** That’s okay! Remember that this is your *professional* network. Who you choose to spend your weekends with is a different kind of networking altogether.
- **A small network isn’t a bad thing!** It’s more important to have tightknit relationships with a few key individuals than to be a name that everyone recognizes but no one truly cares for.

- **Your network will grow over time.** Be patient! Don't lose touch with those in your network who you once had meaningful connection with, but also be open to forming new connections.

Wrapping Up

Great job taking the first step in reading through this introduction on networking. Networking isn't always fun and it will definitely take you out of your comfort zone. But the people you meet and the connections you make can have a significant impact on your personal and professional growth.

Now get out there and make some meaningful connections!