Better networking



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Dipti Thakrar provides some tips to ensure you network more effectively

Key Points

What is the issue?

We are all trying to build a network which goes beyond our current roles, careers and organisations.

What does it mean to me?

The word ‘networking’ carries a baggage of emotions depending on where you are within your career timeline.

What can I take away?

This article offers ideas and easy to incorporate tips that you can use in everyday professional conversations allowing you to create meaningful connections from your networking.

The word ‘networking’ carries a baggage of emotions depending on where you are within your career timeline. My emotions prior to attending an event have ranged from being absolutely petrified to extremely excited – regardless of the stage of my career. I was asked to write this article by a delegate who attended my break-out session for the East Midlands Annual Tax conference in March 2019. I hope you find it useful.

I will offer ideas and easy to incorporate tips that you can use in everyday professional conversations, allowing you to create meaningful connections from your networking. We are all trying to build a network which goes beyond our current roles, careers and organisations.

Before attending an event, you should ask yourself: what do I wish to achieve by attending this 7am breakfast; or an evening panel discussion; or the after-event drinks? You may attend because your peers are going, or your firm has asked you to go. If you plan to attend an event on your own, why do you want to go?

Networking for me today is mainly to give back and learn. I attend events to learn from the amazing people who turn up. I never intend to sell anything and I rarely give out my business card. I connect with people only after having a personal conversation. I have read about networking and tried many things when attending professional networking events. From my experience, I have created the following ‘Do more’ and ‘Do fewer’ lists, which you may want to use the next time you attend an event. And below are some suggestions of places where you can gain help to network better.

Do more of these!

Present yourself well: Always have a smile in your voice and in your gestures. People are likely to approach a friendly face. Present a firm handshake and don't be afraid to offer your hand when you meet someone new. Present the best groomed version of yourself at all times. This will help build your own confidence too.

Be yourself: Prepare a 60 second pitch to showcase who you are and why you are at this event – and practise your pitch before you use it. Depending on the crowd expected at the event, you may prepare different versions of your 60 second pitch. Consider doing a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities grid) analysis on yourself and your firm. This will allow you to present a focused view and prepare you for the questions that will follow.

Role models: Choose people who connect well with others and copy their style. Even better, ask them to mentor you and show you how they stay at ease when they are talking to strangers.

Lead an event: Volunteer to lead and facilitate meetings, take notes or time-keep. All of these tasks will give you an opportunity to be actively present at an event, making it easier for you to navigate the room and be seen. As a delegate to an event, you are often at the mercy of your host so helping and assisting gives you instant recognition in the room.

Create ice breakers (and suggest them to your host): These are a brilliant way to relax smaller groups. My first East Midlands Women in Tax event was attended by 22 people who arranged themselves around the boardroom table waiting for me to chair them through the next hour. (Large boardroom tables are not easy to network across, but perhaps you can move them to create a circle of chairs.) I gave them ice breaker tasks in groups of three, which created memorable moments and has made it very easy for them to remember each other.

Do less of these!

These are the things I would suggest you do less:

Not turning up: Your lack of attendance at key industry events and meetings only impacts your development. These sessions are designed for you to meet the best in the game. Always turn up, even if it is for half a day. The industry will be looking for you there and you will find many like-minded people to connect too.

Clumsy/nervous exit strategies: Always exit gracefully from one conversation to another. You can introduce the group to a new person walking by, or offer to pick up a drink/refreshment for someone. You can also depart professionally: 'I am here to meet many new people and shall take this opportunity to walk around the room.'

Ignoring technology: Use the LinkedIn app and put your Bluetooth on. You will be able to see who else is nearby and has their LinkedIn on, and add them instantly as a connection. Alternatively, you could scan their unique LinkedIn code which instantly connects you too. This makes it easier to connect to people in crowded rooms. Build your professional profile on your firm website and platforms like LinkedIn. You could be headhunted for your next career move. It can be daunting to post on social media, so follow professionals who inspire you so you can find your own personal space where you can add value. Technology is ever growing and you should use it to your advantage.

Using humour: Be mindful of people's sense of humour. We can easily offend due to cultural or language differences.

Not following up: Meeting people at events and striking up an impactful conversation may be easily forgotten if you do not follow up. Try to connect within two days, especially if you promised to deliver a quote, connection or service.

Ignoring barriers: Be mindful of your barriers and test what works for you. Perhaps breakfast or evening sessions do not fit well with the home life, so trying them both with support will allow you to see what works.

Places to increase your network

Professional networking can be through work and all your connections in the industry. A few places to start include:

- CIOT branches offer access to the professional tax network;
- ICAEW, CIMA and ACCA are good for both students and qualified accountants;
- accountancy and law firms offer a range of events from technical breakfast sessions to event days;
- Women in Tax is a national network to connect to women;
- tax and specialist technical forums, both industry and sector led, can be great places to learn through your peers;

- local government websites will highlight forums you can access for business links.

Ask your connections where they prefer to go and why! This often shows the hidden places where you can make meaningful connections that stay in your life for a long time. Get more involved with your local community through charities, schools or college governorships. Offer your time as a mentor to a local college or university. You may find you will pick up skills on how to manage the next generation. Or you can go back to your university as an alumni to provide support and also access their professional events.

Use the following resources to do better

- Complete a SWOT analysis of anything you wish to talk about that day.
- Find out something amazing about three people you meet today. This will take the nerves away and give you something to focus on.
- Read what is trending that day – on both professional and more general topics – so you can keep up a conversation. Or sign up for newsletters that deliver the trends to your inbox before the event.
- Have a bag of questions ready about current work challenges, etc. It can help you to start new discussions.
- Ask for help? There’s no harm in this. If you want something from the evening, then tell everyone all about it!

I hope you have found one thing to add to your style of professional networking from this list.