Networking

Does the word “networking” make your palms sweat? Everyone has heard that networking is the key to career advancement, but how do you even start? An important thing to remember is that networking is not asking for a job, but rather seeking information. Networking may lead to a job by building your connections, but asking the other person if they have a job opening should not be the focus of your discussions. Be sure to make the most out of your opportunities by being well prepared and following up afterwards.

Preparation

Preparation is critical when networking. What are you looking to get out of it? Help with a specific issue? Making general connections in the field? Most people genuinely want to help others, but you have to know what it is you want and how they can help.

Have a short “commercial” about yourself prepared. Lead off the conversation with a brief, 30 second introduction to yourself (educational background, research interests and/or career goals). Be prepared to expand on anything you mention if asked.

Know who to ask. If you are looking for specific advice on an issue, you will want to target those who know something about it. For example, you would not want to ask someone who spends most of his or her time at the bench about the academic job search. General networking will help you build connections for when you do need career advice, but don’t limit yourself to just people in your field. Having connections in a broad range of areas can be beneficial, so do not pass up an opportunity to get to know those outside of your area of expertise.

Sample Networking Questions:
Tell me about your research (or even better- ask them a specific question about their research)
What is a typical work week like for you?
What skills are needed to succeed in this field?
What do you look for when hiring someone to work in your lab?
What is the biggest challenge you faced and how did you overcome it?
What do you find most rewarding about your work?
How did you get into this field?
What advice would you give to someone who is (insert the issue you would like assistance with)?
Who else would you recommend I talk to about this field?
Follow up

Networking is not done once your conversation is over. Be sure to get a business card or contact information of the person you have spoken to and anyone they recommend you speak with. If someone gives you the name of another professional to contact, be sure to do so and let that second person know who suggested you speak with them. Stay in touch with your initial contacts. Remind them of where you met and what you discussed. Share any new ideas you may have had since then. If they gave you additional contacts to speak with, let them know when you have spoken to the people they suggested and thank them again for their assistance.

Always try to give something back. Send your contact an article related to their research or on something you have discussed, or pass along information about an upcoming conference. Don’t forget to offer to return the favor. Perhaps more importantly, pay it forward - when someone approaches you for information be willing to assist them if you can.

Resources:

Informational Interviewing from UCSF’s Office of Career and Professional Development: http://career.ucsf.edu/lifesci/samples/infointerviewquestion.pdf

Science Careers contains several free resources available to registered users including the webinar - Networking: Building Solid Career Connections and a career booklet - Career Trends: Building Relationships. http://scjobs.sciencemag.org/JobSeekerX/