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A step-by-step guide for scientists who hate conference networking

If the thought of ‘working’ a room packed with strangers fills you with dread, academic careers coach Caroline Dunne has some advice.

By [Caroline Dunne](#) 

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It can be hard for early-career researchers to break into conversations at conferences. Credit: Noko LTD/Getty

For some academics, conference networking can be energizing – offering a chance to connect, learn from others and explore new ideas. But for others, the prospect of ‘schmoozing’ at a reception crowded with senior scientists and other established figures can feel daunting.

Networking is not always easy, especially in spaces in which everyone else seems confident and as if they already know each other.

For early-career researchers in particular, approaching senior academics often feels intimidating, exposing feelings of uncertainty or ‘imposter syndrome’ – the idea that your success is somehow undeserved. When walking into a room where you know no one, it’s common to feel out of place, to struggle to break into a conversation or to worry about saying the wrong thing.

Next time you join a conference lunch, coffee break or post-event drinks, perhaps with some trepidation, try to remember that networking can take many forms, and you might not be a stranger to it after all.

If you’ve ever asked a colleague or mentor for advice, collaborated on a paper, contributed to a research group or chatted to a speaker after a seminar, you have networked. Networking also happens constantly during meetings, in research groups and committees and when chatting informally with peers.

In my role as a careers coach working with senior academics around the world, I

advise clients to see networking as a means to boost their professional visibility and to showcase their credibility, expertise and contributions to their field.



Caroline Dunne is an academic careers coach working across the United Kingdom and Australia. Credit: Hester Barnes Photography and Film

Networking supports career development in tangible ways. It makes you known beyond your immediate laboratory or department and throws your name into the ring for collaborations, funding opportunities and new roles. It can also open up ‘sliding-doors moments’ – points at which two professional paths present themselves

and your decision shapes the direction of your career.

In academic careers, networks provide protection and support during periods of uncertainty, and momentum when doors open unexpectedly. If you are not known to a wider network, it's likely your name won't come up spontaneously for jobs and other opportunities, and you won't be considered.

It's not about you

In my experience, one of the most useful shifts is to reframe how you approach networking: make it about others, rather than about promoting yourself. So be curious. Ask questions. Show interest in people's work, motivations and career paths. Most people are happy to talk about what drives them. And adopt a learning mindset. Think of conversations as opportunities to learn from others.

Here are some more ways to polish your networking skills so they become second nature:

Prepare

If you are attending a conference or other event, look at the programme in advance. Identify one or two people whose sessions you're interested in. If appropriate, get in touch before the event to see if they might have time for a brief chat.

Practise

Practise responses for when someone asks, "What do you do?" Resist responding with simply your job title. Instead, try to articulate who you work with, what you are working on, an exciting or intriguing result and why your work is so important to you.

Set goals

Set a small, achievable goal – for example, having one meaningful conversation

during a reception or sending one follow-up message post-event.

On the day

Arrive early if you can. It's often easier to enter a room before it fills.

You don't need to work the room. One genuine conversation is enough.

Look at how people are standing – if one group is in a tight huddle, join another. If you notice someone standing alone, say hello.

Give yourself permission to leave once your energy dips.

Focus on others

Instead of viewing yourself as a guest waiting to fit in, adopt the mindset of a host.

Focus on putting others at ease and helping others to feel that they belong.

Stuck for words?

Simple, open-ended questions work best. Here are some examples:

What are you working on at the moment?

What's something that is exciting (or challenging) for you right now?

What drew you to this field?

Forgotten someone's name? Don't panic

It's everyone's worst nightmare – not remembering somebody's name after you've been chatting to them for a few minutes.

But don't panic. If someone joins you, try, "Do you know each other, have you met

before?” There’s a strong possibility they will introduce themselves.

If you join a group and there’s someone there you recognize but you can’t remember their name, try: “Hello, I’m X, I think we might have met before.”

Or just confess it by saying, “I’m so sorry. I’m having a brain freeze and can’t recall your name.”

There’s a good chance that others are terrible at remembering names, too.

Moving on

If a conversation has run its course, it’s perfectly OK to move on.

A simple, “It’s been lovely chatting. I promised myself I’d meet a few more people tonight, but I hope we’ll reconnect later,” keeps things warm and respectful, and enables you to move on without awkwardness.

Following up

The real value of networking often comes after the event. A short message to say that you enjoyed the conversation or to share a follow-up to something you discussed can turn a brief interaction into a lasting connection.

Online platforms such as LinkedIn can help you to maintain these connections over time.

Measuring success

Success does not mean blitzing the room to meet everyone. It might mean making one to three genuine connections, learning one new thing or leaving with an idea or a sense of possibility. That is more than enough.

Be yourself

Play the long game. Think of networking as an investment in your future self.

Remember, the more you practise and put yourself out there, the easier it becomes.

Networking also doesn't need to be loud or faked, or to feel inauthentic. You do not need to be someone you're not.

This brings me to the most important step of all – relax, be yourself and smile.

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