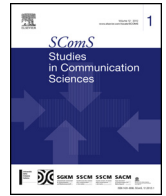




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## Studies in Communication Sciences

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/scoms](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/scoms)



### Conference Report

# “What’s in it for us?” Six dyadic networking strategies in academia

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article history:

Received 11 December 2014

Accepted 19 March 2015

##### Keywords:

Networking

Strategies

Academia

Career advice

Conference panel report

#### ABSTRACT

Networking skills have become increasingly important in the pursuit of academic success. Yet, relatively little has been published in scientific journals about networking in the academic context. To learn more about the importance of academic networking, the Young European Association for Communication Research and Education (YECREA) organized a panel entitled “Successful Networking for an Academic Career: The Importance of Interpersonal Communication”. The panel was held during the annual meeting of the Language and Social Interaction Division at the Università della Svizzera italiana (Switzerland) in October 2013. The present conference report elaborates on the findings from the panel discussion that emerged between senior and junior scholars. Six, seemingly paradoxical yet complementary, pairs of networking strategies are discussed: active–passive; strategic–spontaneous; vertical–horizontal; instrumental–relational; interest-driven–task-driven; what is in it for me–what is in it for us networking.

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### 1. Introduction

Relatively little has been published in scientific journals about networking in the academic context (Carroll et al., 2010; Newby & Heide, 1992; Quinlan, 1999). Networking, which can be defined as “the process of building, nurturing, and leveraging relationships in order to maximize opportunities for yourself and others” (Rhys, 2014), is traditionally associated with corporate and commercial endeavors. However, networking skills have become increasingly important in the pursuit of academic success as well. Networking can be instrumental when, for example, applying for academic positions, building research collaborations, or seeking the specialized advice of senior colleagues. Facilitated by the technological advancements that allow researchers worldwide to connect quickly and easily, it has become standard practice for those working in academia to engage in international partnerships. The ability to establish an international, interdisciplinary network, therefore, has become a key competence for young researchers today.

To learn more about the importance of academic networking, the Young European Association for Communication Research and Education (YECREA) organized a panel entitled “Successful Networking for an Academic Career: The Importance of Interpersonal Communication”. The panel was held during the annual meeting of the Language and Social Interaction Division at the Università della Svizzera italiana (Switzerland) in October 2013. Five senior scholars in the field were invited to join the authors—all early stage researchers—for a semi-structured discussion concerning the relevance of building strong international and interdisciplinary networks and the strategies for doing so in the academic context. The following senior experts participated in the panel: Judith Hall (Northeastern University), Annegret Hannawa (Università della Svizzera italiana), Owen Hargie (University of Ulster), Regina Jucks (University of Münster), and Peter Schulz (Università della Svizzera italiana).

We believe that the discussion that emerged during the panel between the senior scholars and ourselves spruced interesting insights that could be beneficial for young scholars across the academic discipline of communication studies. Much indebted to the senior panelists’ contributions, in the present short communication we therefore would like to share the main networking strategies that emerged from the panel discussion. The strategies have been organized in six dyads. While the dyads at first glance seem to describe sharply contrasting forms of networking, in fact often the strategies are complementary.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scoms.2015.03.012>

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## 2. Dyadic strategies for academic networking

### 2.1. Active–passive networking

A first distinction that can be made is between *active* and *passive* networking strategies. While active networking refers to a purposeful act of reaching out to others and discussing academic work, passive networking is an indirect consequence of one's research endeavors. Young researchers are encouraged to attend conferences and actively build contacts, to interact with other scholars and discuss their work—also outside of formal conference presentations. It is advisable to always have an *elevator talk* ready, a short summary of one's research project that quickly and effectively defines its purpose and value (Annesley, 2010; Westfall, 2012). Taking time before the conference to identify and contact the people one would like to meet can be a fruitful strategy. Another way to get in touch with colleagues is to organize panels or workshops, to chair sessions, and to attend business meetings during the conference and volunteer to take up tasks. These contacts may, in the long run, result into rewarding collaborations. In contrast to active networking, passive networking starts as soon as the young researchers has defined a research topic. A good example of passive networking—a form that is often overlooked yet inherently aligned with one's research activities—is publishing. By publishing research, young researchers become known for their expertise among scholars in the field. Service activities at the home university (e.g., conference organization) or in the field at large (e.g., acting as a peer reviewer) constitute additional opportunities for passive networking. Both forms of networking—active and passive—can be highly effective, especially when integrated. Whereas young researchers' primary focus should be to conduct and publish excellent research, in addition they should actively seek to establish new contacts and possible collaborations.

### 2.2. Strategic–spontaneous networking

Second, a distinction can be drawn between *strategic* and *spontaneous* networking. As the terms already suggest, the former is planned while the latter happens impromptu. Needless to say, whether networking is done strategically or spontaneously depends heavily on the situation as well as one's personality. Regardless of the strategy used, one should always aim to maintain a balance between being proactive and authentic. It is crucial to develop a feeling for the right networking moment. When networking, one should be both professional and social. If networking does not come naturally, these are skills that can be learned over time. When it comes to strategic networking—which may include maintaining contact following a spontaneous networking opportunity—one aims to get noticed. Therefore, creativity is key. While exchanging business cards provides a useful way to get in touch with people, it marks only the first step. Think about, for instance, sharing relevant articles with scholars in the field. One should keep in touch and be responsive. If someone does not respond immediately, young scholars should not hesitate to contact them again. Yet standard or—worse—selfish emails should be avoided at all times. A more obvious strategic form of networking is to become an active member of an online professional community (e.g., Research Gate, Academia.edu, LinkedIn). However, whenever networking becomes the mere result of a strategy, the young researcher runs the risk to lose credibility: Maintaining integrity and authenticity is key, also when aiming to reach a networking objective.

### 2.3. Vertical–horizontal networking

Third, one can distinguish between *vertical* and *horizontal* networking. Both forms of networking are important to young

communication scholars. While vertical networking refers to building and maintaining relationships with colleagues at more advanced stages of their academic career, horizontal networking refers to networking with one's peers. Young researchers should, from the onset, aim to establish an international and interdisciplinary network—both through active and passive, strategic and spontaneous networking. Horizontal networking, on the one hand, may help the young researcher to establish collaborations, to find peer support, as well as friendship. Moreover, networking with colleagues at the same stage of one's academic career is important as peers grow together, while senior colleagues at some point may retire. Vertical networking, on the other hand, is fruitful to gain recognition, which in turn can be instrumental when applying for a job or, for example, in order to get invited as a keynote speaker. Moreover, young scholars can learn from advanced researchers' experiences and knowledge and can benefit from their feedback on their work. A vertical network most likely develops at the initiative of the scholar at the earlier stage of the academic career. Junior researchers may reach out for help to their senior colleagues and as such build a network. They may, for instance, ask experts in their field to become members of their doctoral committees, spend time in their research labs, or reach out to them as a resource of knowledge to aid research activities. Young scholars should not be afraid to contact senior scholars because they do not have an existing network yet: After all, everyone has to start from scratch.

### 2.4. Instrumental–relational networking

The distinction between *instrumental* and *relational* networking refers to one's overarching networking objective. While everyone is inherently strategic—sometimes even without realizing it—it is inadvisable to approach other scholars merely for the sake of establishing instrumental (i.e., functional) contacts. People generally will quickly realize whether they are being used or whether the other is also interested in the relational aspect of the contact. Thus, in order to achieve instrumental contacts young scholars need to have relational skills. Listening skills are crucial, not only to remember people and their work but also to be remembered. People want to be heard. Networking should, therefore, always be a combination of a relational and an intellectual effort. One should be both socially and academically pleasant and, more so, professionally involved. While networking sometimes is a matter of having great intuition, at other times it may be simply good luck. Sometimes, opportunities may fall into your lap. However, as pointed out by the panelists, it is always up to the scholar whether to make use of the opportunity or not. At times, collaborations may initially be instrumental and become relational, blurring the boundaries of the two concepts. Building friendships can be an important addition to building networks. To speak with one of the panelists: "Friendship and collaboration may progress together. You do not necessarily need to be best friends with collaborators, not at all. But it is definitely more fun that way."

### 2.5. Interest-driven–task-driven networking

Communication is a science that is applicable across other disciplines and contexts as well. Think of the medical context, the political sphere, and even academia itself. Communication scholars therefore need to build not just international but also interdisciplinary contacts. Networking can be *interest-driven* or *task-driven*. Interest-driven networking refers to scholars' keenness to meet other people working in their field, scholars that share similar interests. Task-driven networking is a more specific, target-oriented form of networking in which one reaches out to another scholar to help accomplish a certain task. A young scholar may, for example, want to gain access to data or tap into someone's specific set

of skills, for example, for purposes of data analysis. While sharing a research interest is not a prerequisite for task-driven networking, it can surely be helpful. Moreover, it is important to note that interest-driven and task-driven networking can occur both strategically or spontaneously, may have relational and instrumental aspects, and may be done vertically as well as horizontally. Particularly when task-driven networking happens spontaneously, one should carefully think what is the advantage of the collaboration for the person one is networking with. This brings us to the last distinction.

### 2.6. *What is in it for me—what is in it for us networking*

Whenever young scholars reach out and ask other researchers for help or a collaboration, they should also be open to offer something in return. In one of the senior panelists' words, they should not only think in terms of *what's in it for me* (WIIFM) but also in terms of *what's in it for you* (WIIFY). If a collaboration results from the networking, one can speak of a *what's in it for us* (WIIFU) outcome. "Life is reciprocal. Also when networking in academia, the norm of reciprocity applies." Young scholars should keep this in mind when talking to their senior colleagues. They should consider WIIFU and be humble as a collaboration is not always given when initiating a contact with someone. One contact can open up doors to potential other contacts, but it can be very difficult to break into an existing network—even with a good reputation. In those cases one should be even more mindful not to run the risk of shameless and selfish self-promotion and to think, first and foremost, in terms of WIIFY: Why would the other person be interested in collaborating with me on this project? Networking is not only about how you can benefit, but also about what you have to offer.

### 3. Conclusion

Networking is not only essential for success in academia, but it should also be seen as a very natural component of the

academic profession. Research is typically not a purely individualistic endeavor. While independence is important, young scholars need to build international and interdisciplinary contacts from their early career onward. They should reach out to peers and senior colleagues to advance their research, as well as to make their daily academic life more pleasant. In the present short communication we aimed to offer young scholars like ourselves some guidance concerning the most crucial strategies for successful networking in academia. These strategies were presented in the form of contrasting dyads. Yet, the most important message early stage researchers should take out is that the described dyads should not only be balanced but also adapted according to one's goals as well as the specific context.

### Acknowledgements

We are very thankful to Judith Hall, Annegret Hannawa, Owen Hargie, Regina Jucks, and Peter Schulz for their precious contribution to the workshop and their support in writing this article.

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