

# Australian Biochemist Students' Page

## Professional Networking

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### What is professional networking?

It is a way of connecting to, communicating with and getting to know people from the same or a related area of work, to exchange ideas, design and work on collaborative projects.

### Why do we need to develop a professional network?

If you want to get a better job or improve your current situation, then you must learn to network professionally with others in your work area or in other areas. Networking strengthens relationships with colleagues, or builds new ones with people in your discipline. Through the interactions established in a network, you can develop a better understanding of your own discipline, learn new methods/techniques, discuss experimental design, develop collaborations or find a job in the area that interests you.

Building relationships with other researchers or potential employers is important to establish your reputation in the area. Before the times of the internet, networks were established mostly face-to-face through participation in conferences, other meetings, scientific visits or discussions at work with colleagues and their friends. Nowadays, a lot of professional and social networking is done in a virtual space through online networks. However, most people feel that just signing up to online networks is not enough, and that you still should work on developing your network in the real world through meetings, emails or conversations.

As a student, you should be aiming to expand your knowledge, learn new techniques and find what you want to do once you graduate. With more and more scientific findings being published, it can feel impossible to read it all, and with technology racing ahead, it can become impossible to get to know all the new techniques. You need to be able to contact people using those techniques, have it explained by them or collaborate with them to use it in your own project.

When you are advanced in your career, you have an established professional network through conferences, through students who have graduated and moved on to new jobs, or through collaborating with many people in different laboratories. Yet, you still should think not only about maintaining contact with your current or past colleagues, but also about expanding your network. This can allow you to exchange experiences, facts or knowledge with more than just your immediate colleagues, establish new collaborations, gain access to technologies not currently available to you, learn about new interesting research and search for your next job. You can take advantage of recommendations made by others about people, services or products.

When you look for a job, a professional network can allow you to search for potential employers. A professional network can also allow you to identify potential partners or investors for a venture and help you succeed in it. While online networks help you make the first step in the right direction, you will still need to follow them up in real life.

### How does professional networking work?

Signing up for a network is a great start, but it is not adequate. It is important to play an active part in your

network, as this allows you to build up your reputation and show others your expertise. Therefore, part of networking is taking part in the group discussions and Q&A forum, where you can acquire and share your knowledge. You can share documents, presentations or videos.

### Why should students work on networks like this?

It is the time when you are learning a lot and meeting a lot of new people, including other students, postdocs and professors. These people will be reading your thesis, papers, grants, or fellowship or job applications. They need to know you better than your CV can present you. Through networking, you can demonstrate your skills and share them with others. Even if you think that the little fix you came up with is unimportant, someone else might find lifesaving (or at least timesaving).

Interacting with others also teaches you to explain to them what you are doing. The further away from your field of study, the more challenging is such a task. You will often be asked what your research is about and you need to explain what you do succinctly in two or three sentences.

### What are ways of creating networks?

The most obvious way of creating a network is through face-to-face contact, however, the adequacy of such a network can vary for several reasons. Firstly, you can only meet so many people directly. Secondly, you mostly meet people that work in your area or a related one, thus limiting your immediate network to a group from a narrow field of interests. The next level is through introduction by someone or by directly calling the person you wish to meet or discuss a problem with. Introductions generally work well, while the 'cold calling' does not always work.

The newest way of networking is through professional networking sites on the internet, such as LinkedIn, Xing, Plaxo or Labroots, where you create and maintain your own profile, participate in various group discussions, learn new things and meet new people. The real key here is you need to participate to gain from networking! It is not enough to just join the site.

### Are there any risks?

Despite what you may hear from various people, online professional networking is no more dangerous than your regular face-to-face networking. The golden rules are the same: never disclose private information on such networks that you would not want others to know. On some sites (like Xing), you have a high level of control of how much information you want to share with someone else; on others (e.g., LinkedIn), it is regulated on a global level.

### Science networking

The majority of professional networking sites do not particularly cater to scientists. There are groups within them for scientists and there is limited scientific discussion there. Recently, a new networking site was created with a sole purpose of linking together scientists from all areas.

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The platform is called Labroots ([www.labroots.com](http://www.labroots.com)). It offers group discussions, blogs, jobs, conferences, various tools and, soon to come, file sharing. You are already able to share some documents through your profile and will soon be able to share more, including things like lectures and presentations. You can directly approach other people to ask their permission to use their material. The same applies for protocols or papers, and the team is open for any other new ideas. It allows you also to create your own group; for example, we can create an ASBMB group, be it a general or a student one.

## Summary

It is important to build and maintain a network of friends and colleagues, and powerful tools are offered by internet networking sites to link to new people. There is nothing more refreshing than asking someone not linked to your project about their opinion on your own research. It opens up your mind to other possibilities and it can also open new career possibilities, giving you opportunities you never knew existed. In science, we cannot really be enclosed in our own little shell, we need to share our knowledge with others and learn from others, regardless of whether we are students or professors, academics or industry professionals.

