

An engineer's guide to networking



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Innumerable articles and training programs have been written on the subject of networking. Among the younger generation, social networking has become a primary means of communicating. So, the question may arise as to why another article on networking is needed. This column's purpose is to discuss networking in the context of engineers working in the global chemical and refining industry.

Typically, engineers tend to network only when they need something, such as a career change. Alternatively, the authors recommend networking as an ongoing activity. In today's volatile business environment with corporate consolidation, corporate restructuring, plant closings and project delays, it is critical for engineers at every level to have a broad-based, active network of peers, mentors and coaches. The old adage of, "It is not *what* you know, but *who* you know," has never been more true than in this dynamic industry atmosphere.

Networking is important for many reasons. It can help engineers stay current with the latest developments, such as market trends, new technologies and engineering tools, and industry activities. Networking with peers to benchmark and learn new skills helps an engineer expand their horizons beyond their specialized work function. This helps people do their job better and is applicable to every function, including sales, marketing, procurement, project management, process engineering and construction management. In some disciplines, there is a greater supply of engineers than demand, and networking is one way to differentiate oneself in a competitive employment market. In other words, networking greatly helps position a person for the next career move consistent with industry trends.

Creating a viable network. It is important to consider both the softer, conceptual issues and the hard mechanistic methods. Conceptual issues must be approached

with a sincere interest and concern to help others. The ability to listen and connect disparate people, facts and figures is very helpful. People do not forget a kind word or a helpful act, even after many years. It is indeed a small world in terms of people in the capital-intensive process industry. Networking must be a two-way street, and is not something that should be turned on and off only when something is needed.

After working in the industry for several decades and watching it evolve, the authors stress the importance of having a strong foundation, in terms of intent, before launching into the nuts and bolts of developing a network. Some good mechanistic techniques are:

- Join LinkedIn, Toastmasters or other media sites
- Connect with colleagues, ex-employees, college alumni, friends and neighbors
- Attend conferences, make presentations and write articles
- Participate in specialized trade associations and volunteer for committees.

A good network includes people that are involved both internally and externally with an organization or company. A lot of value exists in developing relationships within a company. This is especially true in large multinational organizations. By having good contacts within your own and related functions within an organization, it is possible to learn, exchange information and collaborate. Information can flow horizontally and directly between people instead of needing to go up vertically through silos. This is faster and more effective for all parties concerned.

Sustaining networking as an SOP. Maintaining and increasing the network becomes a challenge because everyone is busy. For networking to be effective, it is important to conduct it on a continuous basis. The business world is competitive, and many good performers are losing

their jobs. It is important to distinguish yourself among the other good performers. Networking is a way to stay current with technical advances and business trends. This can add valuable input to your company and makes you a potential candidate to other organizations.

Networking should be standard operating procedure for engineers. Each week, time should be set aside to accomplish it, and goals should be set as to the level of networking to be achieved. This is a case where quality overshadows quantity. Focus on making contact with people and organizations aligned with your business and/or technical field. Remember, it is a two-way street, so always be prepared to offer information or assistance to others. Being altruistic is the watchword for effective networking. You will have little success if you are not willing to do your part. When carried out conscientiously, effective networking is a win for you, your colleagues and your company.

One significant hurdle is that many technical people find it challenging to interface and network with others, and therefore do not attempt communications. These challenges include:

- **Technical people do not see communications skills as essential.** Many engineers believe communication is something to be endured to get to the technical "meat."
- **Technical people are not expected to be strong communicators.** Often, technical people feel that they are counted on for their knowledge, and they rely on others to understand if their communication is subpar. This is not a positive approach to promote networking.
- **Communications are not considered part of an engineer's makeup.** Some technical people give up on communications because they feel it is not in their personality, or because they are intimidated by the extroverted and gregarious people around them. It is inaccurate to assume that introverts are poor communicators; in truth, introverts tend to be good listeners and have the capability to be strong communicators, if motivated.

Several opportunities exist to find help in developing communication and networking skills. Located in nearly ev-

ery city, Toastmasters organizations offer an opportunity to enhance communication skills through peers. Organizations with the sole purpose of networking tend to be open, supportive and non-threatening. If you feel reticent about the idea of networking, seek out support from colleagues or an appropriate organization.

A proactive approach. As the global chemical and refinery industries be-

come increasingly more competitive, professional networking has never been more important. Make networking part of your professional life, just as you make a workout part of your daily regimen. It should become a standard operating procedure, as it is a win for all involved and increases your value to your employer. The payoff may not be immediate, but many positives will develop over time. **HP**



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