

Making the Most of Memberships

If you are really serious about career security, career advancement, and professional development, then think strategically about your professional memberships. Here are some ways to approach your decisions about which groups to join and how to manage your memberships in them. These decisions are some of the most important career choices you will ever make.

Unfortunately, many people mismanage their memberships by failing to generate a beneficial network through such affiliations. For instance, someone may be a joiner who belongs to eight or ten organizations but is not active in any of them. That person thinks that joining alone creates a network. Not so. Another common mistake is trying to keep up with the times by reading journals and not joining a single professional organization. Both of these people are ignoring a crucial point: Active involvement in professional organizations gives you the connections you need to further your career. In fact, *who knows you* can prove just as important as *what you know* and *who you know*.

Maximizing the benefits from your memberships may not be easy. You may be thinking that you work too hard to have time left over for networking. You may worry that your organization will not pay for you to go to conferences. Or maybe you are not comfortable standing around shooting the breeze. Nonetheless, you can use the following skills to make networking through professional memberships worth the time and money, and more comfortable than you ever imagined.

CHOOSE MEMBERSHIPS STRATEGICALLY.

You can choose the best memberships by assessing your career goals and then selecting the groups that will put you in touch with the people who can help you reach your objectives. For instance, a physicist who is planning a second career as a teacher might consider getting active in the



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American Association of Physics Teachers, in addition to The American Physical Society. Before you pursue any organization, however, you should explore how quickly you could move into a leadership role that would give you more contacts and career visibility. In other words, save time by doing your research and looking before you leap into aimless activity. In addition, consider the benefits of becoming active in groups such as your alumni association, the board of directors of your local hospital, or the local chamber of commerce. You never know where you might find your next job— or career.

INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO THE LEADERS.

As a newcomer to an organization, you might stand back and wait to be noticed, believing that the leaders are too busy to talk with you. That would be a big mistake. Find topics to discuss. For example, you might say: "I remember you were on a panel last month. I enjoyed your presentation, and I'm interested in knowing more about your work." At the same time, however, you should also be prepared to discuss yourself.

Make valuable contributions. Leaders always appreciate volunteers. Enhance your visibility in an organization by contributing

your expertise in various ways: writing an article for a newsletter, chairing a committee, or introducing a speaker. Just remember that you are about to place a very talented person—yourself—in a key position, so volunteer your time wisely.

TELL PEOPLE YOUR TALENTS, NOT YOUR TITLE.

When someone asks you the routine question, "What do you do?", answer in a way that starts a conversation. If you answer by saying that you are "with the Center for Astrophysics" or "the head of the lab at the Research Institute," people may just smile politely and say, "How nice." Beyond bringing the conversation to a halt, you just missed your chance to teach people about your specialities. Make it easier for people to develop a conversation with you by describing a recent project or accomplishment in a couple of sentences, such as: "I work on materials used in the microelectronics industry. At the moment, I'm working on high-temperature superconducting thin films, which could affect the next generation of cellular-phone links." In the end, talking about a project is always much more memorable than stating a job title or organization's name.

COME WITH A PURPOSE. More than 85% of the people who attend networking events come without a purpose—unaware of what they want to learn and the people they want to meet. Is it any wonder that they leave feeling dissatisfied? Instead, prepare an agenda ahead of time. For example, decide which participants you want to meet or reconnect with, what you want to learn, what resources you might acquire, or who at the meeting might be able to help you solve a problem that is clamoring for attention back on your desk. In other words, if you come prepared, you can get a surprising amount accomplished during an hour or two of people contact.

HELP OTHERS ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS. Beyond satisfying your own agenda, also look for ways to give information, resources, or referrals to others. Suppose that you are at the annual meeting of the Optical Society of America, and you meet someone who is going to move to the Southwest. If you used to live in Albuquerque, for example, what resources, contacts or information do you have that might be of help? By going out of your way and giving generously to help others meet their needs and challenges, you will be able to start solid relationships.

FOLLOW UP TO BUILD LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS. Many people think that going to events equals networking. They believe that “membership” means reading a newsletter and attending meetings. To make the most of your membership, target a few people for long-term relationships. After an introduction to a person, keep in touch through telephone calls, exchanging relevant articles or serving on a committee together. You might even be coauthors on a paper. It takes at least half a dozen contacts with someone before you know each other’s expertise and trust in each other’s character enough to form a worthwhile, lasting professional relationship.

By starting with a strategy, you will reap the maximum impact from the time and money you spend on memberships. You can develop the “netiquette” that builds long-term relationships with other professionals. As you build networks, continually assess what personal and professional benefits your memberships provide. When you make memberships work for you, you will make networking an art, not an accident. ■

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