

Effective Professional Networking

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Abstract

The reasons for NPs to develop a professional network are boundless and are likely to change over time. Networking opens doors and creates relationships that support new opportunities, personal development, collaborative research, policy activism, evidence-based practice, and more. Successful professional networking involves shared, mutually beneficial interactions between individuals and/or individuals and groups, regardless of whether it occurs face-to-face or electronically. This article combines nuggets from the literature with guidance based on the authors' combined experience in networking activities at the local, national, and international levels.

Key words

Nurse practitioners; Advanced practice nurses; NPs; APNs; Networking; Relationships; Communication; Professional growth

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Introduction

With the advent and growth of social media (SoMe), the idea of networking for many has degenerated to denote the non-strategic accumulation of likes, follows, contacts, and links. Dictionary.com defines networking as a supportive system of sharing information and services among individuals and groups having a common interest. Successful professional networking involves shared, mutually beneficial interactions between individuals and/or individuals and groups, regardless of whether it occurs face-to-face or electronically. The formation of coalitions and alliances assists with planned change and may gather more organizational or political clout. Adegbola (2011) compares the V-formation of migrating geese to networking, or scholarly tailgating, creating “an aerodynamic lift for one’s career and capitalizing on the expertise of others to help professional dreams materialize (p.51). In Give and Take, Grant (2013) illustrates how giving benefit to others is associated with the long-term success of networking and relationships, in general.

“How-to” articles on networking are common in business publications but relatively rare in publications targeting nurses, advanced practice nurses (APNs), nurse practitioners (NPs), or other healthcare professionals. However, the contributions of professional networking among NPs has been tied to efforts to decrease turnover in primary care (Faraz, 2017), enhance clinical autonomy (Weiland, 2015), clarify role value with healthcare systems (Bahouth, et al 2013) and interdisciplinary teams (Quinland & Robertson, 2013), and achieve policy goals (VanBeuge & Walker, 2016; Kostas-Polston, Thanavaro, Arvidson, & Taub, 2015).

The reasons for focusing on the development of a professional network are boundless. Networking opens doors and creates relationships that support new opportunities, personal development, collaborative research, policy activism, evidence-based practice, and more. Covey (2013) describes the

importance of enlarging our circles of influence in order to be able to affect change within our circles of concern. Networking skills are critical in expanding our circles of influence. To put the power and potential reach of networking in perspective, Hoffman and Casnocha (2012) describe the value of networks through “three degrees of separation”, describing a hypothetical example in which an individual may have 40 first degree contacts, each of whom averages 35 unique contacts, each of whom averages 45 unique contacts. This hypothetical network would provide 63,000 contacts available for introduction and communications.

Interdisciplinary networking provides contracts for personal development and for establishing contacts for collaboration in patient care. For NPs networking is a way to produce collaboratively oriented health care. In order to successfully collaborate, social and professional interaction within and across networks occurs. In general, people tend to cluster with others with others who are similar and more comfortable. Therefore the creation of networking in the interprofessional arena is challenging (Cunningham et al, 2012). In order to build larger networks, NPs must understand the different characteristics of other disciplines, the gender and generational differences in order to bridge personal development and improve quality of patient care. In order to successfully network with other disciplines, an understanding of the structure, characteristics and how networks function are essential.

The existing “how to network” literature includes significant overlap of key recommendations, albeit with unique interpretive discussions. This article combines nuggets from the literature with guidance based on the authors’ combined experience in networking activities at the local, national, and international levels.

For APNs such as NPs, there are almost endless opportunities to network. For instance, meaningful networking opportunities exist for those practicing in or employed by health systems, universities, or other large organizations. Local NP-specific or interdisciplinary organizations and related meetings

provide a chance for networking, as do larger state and national organizations. Within the nursing and NP realm, there are meetings or conferences relevant to most interests. For instance, the state and national NP organizations convene NPs and speakers from all areas (practice, research, education, and policy), as do some national interdisciplinary or specialty organizations. There are meetings specific to education (e.g. National Organization of NP Faculty or the American Association of Colleges of Nursing), research (e.g. Southern Nursing Research Society or Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality), and health policy (e.g. AANP's Health Policy Conference, Academy Health's Policy Conference). Other opportunities include alumni organizations, clinical advocacy organizations, and local business or service organizations such as Rotary, Kiwanis, and Optimists. Of course, SoMe provides a growing venue through which to network. Regardless of the venue, the skill-set needed for effective networking is similar.

Generally, the recommendations for successful professional networking fall into one of three categories: planning, communicating, and following up.

Planning

Purposeful networking starts with planning. Many are uncomfortable with the whole concept of networking, believing it to be a sullied means of self-promotion. Done properly, nothing could be further from the truth, as two or more individuals seek to establish authentic, sincere, synergistic, and sustainable relationships. Moreover, networking should be pursued with a goal of balancing the quantity with quality of one's contacts. Taylor (2013) proposes a model for systematically assessing one's existing networks and the challenges that would be addressed by current or future networks, then planning for future networking to fill professional development gaps. Triffin (2014) describes considering each of your career goals and then creating a list of persons who could be helpful in those areas, planning a strategy for making connections.

Noted earlier, there are many venues for networking. The most diverse group of contacts is often present at large meetings or conferences. When attending a meeting or networking opportunity where the attendee list is shared in advance, review the list to identify persons you would like to meet.

Knowing attendees in advance allows you to research key individuals' backgrounds (e.g. publications, research, academic training, previous employment) to use in your conversations.

Scan the presenter lists to identify persons whose work you respect or know. These are also prospective connections that you may approach before or after their talk. When possible, reach out to speakers in advance of the meeting and request an opportunity to briefly discuss their work over coffee or following their session.

Maintain interest in meeting persons who are not on your target list. Conversations may be the most natural when you are communicating with a person you have not sought out specifically because of their title. (Llopis, 2012). Professional networking involves being generous with your time when others seek to network with you, not just pursuing others. Carnegie (2016) quotes Emerson, "Every man I have met is in some way superior to me". Beyond the generosity of paying it forward, you will find that everyone brings a unique contribution to the networking relationship, regardless of their career level, --- and that your networks will often complement one another's.

Not everyone is comfortable launching conversations among persons they do not know. For some, it may be helpful to enlist the cooperation of a "wing man" for initial networking forays (Hicks & Maleef, 2015) or to arrive at an event early enough that one or two individuals can be approached at a time, before the group grows. Another helpful idea is to strike up the conversation "in line" (Cassery, 2010), for instance while waiting to enter an event or meeting or going through a buffet line. In line, each individual already has one person on either side so that there is less pressure in starting a conversation and introduction.

Of course, networking warrants planning beyond the initial physical approach so that the encounter does not evolve into random small talk chat, but optimizes the opportunity to develop a complementary and reciprocal relationship. Be prepared with contextual questions that you can use to stimulate conversation and demonstrate interest in your new contacts. Conversation can also be stimulated by remembering to ask “Who, What , How, Where, When, Why” questions. For example:

- Who influenced your interest in . . . ?
- What was the biggest challenge you encountered when you. . . ?
- What would you do differently based on . . . ?
- How did you go about securing. . . ?
- Where would you recommend going to find . . . ?
- When did you know that the project would be . . . ?
- Why do you think no one had ever. . . ?

You can also describe a problem you have encountered and ask the other’s recommendation.

As important as the questions used to stimulate conversations are the points you would like to share about yourself. Plan what you want to, as well as what you have to offer others in the way of connections, advice, etc. Rather than rely on a rigid elevator speech, identify talking points that will allow you to talk extemporaneously based on the context of the conversation. Enter into the experience believing that you are a person “worth knowing” (Berlin, 2015).

Communicating

Throughout the networking activity, be present and authentic. Explore your person’s passions. Believe it or not, the recommendations provided by Dale Carnegie so long ago are still useful in guiding good conversations. He encouraged persons to demonstrate genuine interest in others, listen, encourage

others to talk, and use questions as noted above. He urged his readers to call the person by name, asking them to repeat (and even spell) the name if needed (Carnegie, 2016). This is very important to enable you to follow-up with persons when you do not collect their card during the conversation. But people want to share their passions and interests with others who indicate interest through clarifying questions and non-distracted attention. Remaining attentive rather than allowing your mind to wander to your next connection or other issues ensure that you will not be caught off-guard in the midst of a conversation, but ready to respond appropriately (Llopis, 2012).

During the conversation, be sure to get a card or other contact information. Make brief notes or a consistent rating shorthand on the card (or mental notes), to help you follow-up afterwards. If there is something you want to note during the conversation rather than waiting, the person likely will be pleased that you are interested in remembering key points. Remember to offer something of value or need to the other person before making a request for yourself. For example, offer to make an introduction to someone else in your network, with their permission, or to share a relevant article or online resource after your meeting. If nothing comes to mind, you can always ask “How can I help you?” or let your new contact know that you hope they will keep you in mind should a future need arise (Vest, 2014). Adam Grant (2013) shares the concept of the “five minute favor”. These favors are literally actions that can be taken to assist others in five minutes or less. Examples include reviewing your contacts looking for persons who would benefit from knowing one another and helping them connect, offering to review someone’s work and provide feedback, and sharing relevant resources.

Purposeful networking can be taxing. If needed, take breaks (Casserly, 2010). Close one conversation by saying you had promised to talk to someone else, make a call at a given time, etc. During the break, you can recharge you energy, make notes for follow-up, or simply plan who you will target next. Before closing the conversation, always make sure you have the person’s contact information and be sure to let them know that you will follow-up.

Following up

The act of following up is critical in establishing and nurturing a successful professional networking.

Some suggest sending an unexpected hand-written note, but however accomplished, be sure to follow-up. In your note, email, or call, remember to focus back on their interests to demonstrate the importance of your initial conversation and strengthen the relationship. Importantly, follow through on anything you offered or promised during the initial meeting. If you indicated you would bridge and introduction or share an article, to so to demonstrate accountability and caring.

Overtime, take the time to maintain and nurture your network. While some networking benefits will be seen quickly, others take time, so that “If you are not networking for the long haul, stay home” (Michaels, 2013). Hoffman (2012), a LinkedIn founder, describes the importance of having balance between new and established, strong and weaker ties in successful networks. To strengthen relationships over time, continue to offer to be of service in some way. Show interest in continuing conversations—without these conversations, contacts do not know what others are working on or need. Writing primarily to entrepreneurs, Hoffman describes relationships as “living, breathing things” that cannot survive or grow if neglected. In fact, recognizing the time and expenses that can be associated with network maintenance, he describes successful networkers who set aside funds to support their ability to routinely meet with their contacts in social settings or at distance, proactively and when they need assistance.

Groups that both Hoffman (2012) and Grant (2013) recommend following up with are your weak or dormant connections. These are persons with whom you have not been in contact regularly, perhaps in years. During the absence of communication, both you and they have potentially had changes career, interests, needs, and contacts. Setting aside a given amount of time each week or month to follow-up with one or more of these connections from your past allows you to catch up and identify synergistic

opportunities. Moreover, because these weaker connections are peripheral to those with whom you have maintained regular communication, they are likely to have information regarding opportunities or resources that your closer contacts do not have.

Part of following up includes your personal reflection on your networking success. Networking is a learned skill and you should consider what worked and what might be done differently in the future. Also take the time to occasionally assess the depth and breadth of your existing network, looking for gaps.

Social Media and Email In Professional Networking

This article focuses primarily on face-to-face networking, although professional networking can occur by telephone, email, and SoMe. The access to the internet has exponentially increased our ability to learn about and communicate with prospective contacts and to convey information to others. There are a number of SoMe professional networking sites (Turner, 2016). Beyond these general sites, many professional organizations have communication boards or portals through which persons with shared interest may make contact. In general, the networking tactics are the same, regardless of the method used to establish contacts.

Currently, LinkedIn is among the most frequented sites for nurses and others. There are some common details that should be considered when participating on LinkedIn or similar sites. First, make sure that your profile is up to date, well-formatted, and free of errors. When posting a photograph, it should be professional and engaging.

Be strategic in establishing a network online. Carefully consider requests from others to connect, avoiding complete strangers and persons who have nothing in common with you (Triffin, 2014).

Everyone you accept becomes part of your online network and reflects on your reputation. When reaching out to others to request connections through LinkedIn, an individualized messages is

preferable to the template request provided, allowing recipients to consider how you would add to add to their network.

Similarly, when networking by email, use a succinct and personalized message. Address recipients by name and describe how your interests relate to theirs in one or two sentences. Keep the message as brief as possible, to optimize the chance that it will cut through their likely inbox clutter. Add an “ask” using one of the questions described earlier in this article. Alternatively, you could ask their permission to send them material about your interest or project or to schedule time to talk by phone. Always offer something. As described before, this could be simply to send them an article they may find interesting (do not attach to the initial message) or for them to let you know how you might be of assistance to them. While email does provide the same benefit of a face-to-face meeting, it does offer support a broader number of possible contacts. By practicing good email and networking etiquette, the likelihood of having a response increases. As always, be sure to follow-up in any way that you promise.

Conclusion

Although networking during different stages of one’s career may be different and the mechanisms utilized to network may change over time, the principles remain the same. The skill of building professional networks is necessary for NPs to stay intra and inter connected within and outside of nursing and healthcare. Effective networking not only provides mutual benefits to the networking groups but also benefits to other stakeholders such as the patients NPs serve.

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