Networking in Academia

What is the "goal" of networking?

2 Primary uses:

To meet folks for other career opportunities/advancement

To establish research collaborations

Senior academics are CONSTANTLY making decisions

People in full-time academic jobs, who are often quite busy (juggling teaching, research, and service responsibilities), are constantly being asked to make decisions among candidates.

For instance: I have been faculty for 7.5 years, and I have:

- Evaluated >400 PhD applications, interviewed >20, advised ~10
- Considered >150 faculty candidate applications, interviewed >50
- Considered dozens of postdoc applications, hired two (Matus now faculty at UIUC, Andre at Yale)

The challenge is how to cut through this noise…

How to make <u>yourself stand out</u> when interacting with these busy academics?

Success in academia

There are two things that get you an offer for: PhD training, postdoc, internship, faculty position, tenure, industry, etc.

- Your **CV**
  - Educational institutions
  - GPA, GRE, TOEFL, etc.
  - Papers
  - Other academic achievements (e.g. fellowships)

- Your **network**
  - Advisors and committee members
  - Co-authors, collaborators, researchers you've visited
  - Friends made through grad school and internships,
  - Acquaintances from conferences, anyone you've had a 1-1 email exchange
  - People who have read your papers
  - Co-reviewers, editors and meta-reviewers

The network is MORE important than CV

OF COURSE: the CV always needs to be good enough. This is what gets you in the door.

HOWEVER: candidates under consideration all have good CVs

Final decisions always depend on both **formal** and **informal** personal evaluations

- Formal: reference letters most important tool for evaluating a candidate
- Informal: these are other important ways to get information on a candidate:
  - "I recognize this individual's name from a talk announcement"
  - "Have I read this person's paper(s)?"
  - "This student asked me excellent questions after a talk I gave in the Fall"
  - "Oh I saw this candidate give a talk last summer"
  - "They seem to be working with some strong people"
  - "Oh let me get a reference from one of their collaborators"

Why do decisionmakers rely on the network?

1. The reputation system in academia is quite strong, so people don't put their names behind others unless they truly believe in them
2. Picking PhD students, postdocs, faculty, is a very **risk-averse** business (for better or worse), and recommendation letters can raise red flags if necessary
3. Humans can provide a much richer picture of a candidate that can't be described in a CV (see next slide)

What the CV does not tell us

CV's are great for certain things, like signalling productivity. But certain things are hard to tell from a CV. For example:

- Does this candidate have unbridled enthusiasm for the work they are doing?
- Does the candidate have the "get 'er done" gene? Do they get stuck on details?
- Does the candidate have research taste that matches possible collaborators?
- Does the candidate have the ability to dive into a paper and understand the details in a deep way? Can the candidate communicate these ideas effectively?
- Does the candidate have intellectual creativity? Do they generate new ideas?
- Does the candidate manage their time effectively?
- What exactly did candidate contribute to Paper X?

Important aside: this system is bad and needs to change

The system we are describing here has lots of problems, and most of us know it:

1. It fundamentally relies on an "old boy's network" which has major implications for fairness, equity, and inclusivity.
2. Reinforces systemic biases both on methodology and topic focus, as well as on the demographics of the selected candidates.
3. Makes it hard for "outsiders", without the ability to build relationships with well-established players, to break into the "in-group".
4. Tends to limit the heterogeneity of ideas brought into the system.

While very important, this talk is not about these problems. We are going to focus instead on how best to navigate this system and set you up for success.

Networking Tips

For a post-pandemic world

Networking 101: go to (the top) conferences

- Value of meeting people in your field in person is **way** too high to skip confs
- Even if you don't have a paper!
  - No one knows or cares if you're just attending
- Your advisor probably has the funding, you just need to ask.
- No funding from advisor? Your university probably has a pool of travel money
- No funding from University? The conference will probably pitch in

Networking 101: Access to top conferences

- Not everyone has funds available to travel to any conference they'd like.
  - Many possible ways to find funding
    - Some conferences have (full and partial) scholarships
      - E.g. ALT is free to register for this year!
    - Many concurrent events (especially DEI focused ones) sponsor attendees
      - Examples: WiML, Black in AI, Women in Theory
    - Currently conferences are remote! Take advantage, attend talks **and poster sessions!**
    - Your university probably has a pool of travel money
- Bottom line: there are funds available, you just have to look and plan ahead.

Networking 101: attend conference social events

A great way to meet new people is through informal social events

This is where important people let their guard down, they relax, and folks will just discuss fun stuff

You never know when you'll end up in a great conversation!

(It helps, although is not required, to like wine/beer...)

Networking 101: introduce yourself… to the right people

- Researchers attending conferences want to meet other researchers
- Don't be shy!
- BUT make sure you have something important to discuss!
- Good Examples:
  - "I read your recent work, and I'm still surprised by the results in Section 4. Doesn't that beat the lower bound of Einstein et al?"
  - "That was a great talk you gave at XYZ. I really wanted to hear more about the proof techniques though"
  - "I'm considering an internship offer from IBM. You worked there last summer, your thoughts?"
- Bad Example:
  - "Hey how can I get a faculty job at your university?"

Networking 101: how much time do you have?

- When you get a chance to chat with a researcher, you need to figure out **how much time you have**!
  - 1-2 minutes: you're at a conference social event
  - 3-4 minutes: you're at someone's poster
  - 8-12 minutes: you're at a bar, ordering a drink, next to someone you've recently met
  - 20-25 minutes: you're visiting a university for an interview, meeting a new faculty member
- It's good to practice this!
- After a number of faculty interviews, e.g., you'll get very good at the 20-25 minute version.

Networking 101: give as many (GOOD!) talks as you can

We already heard about how to structure talks…

BUT just to summarize:

1. There is no better way to leave a good impression than to give a great talk
2. It's rare to have 5mins, let along 30-60mins, where important people will pay attention to your ideas. Use this time wisely!
3. A talk is not just a good way to show your skills and achievements, it also shows your curiosities and future goals -- people want to know "where is this researcher headed?"

Don't be shy about asking to give a talk schools and research labs. Many seminar slots go unfilled! Shoot an email to your contact and see if they have an opening.

Networking 101: asking questions after talks, the right way

Getting up to ask a question after a conference talk can be a great way to interact with the speaker in a public forum, and gain visibility. **But some warnings:**

1. Show **humility**. Suggesting there might be a technical bug, or some relevant work wasn't cited, will not impress anyone. You'll turn off the speaker and the audience, particularly when such issues can be addressed offline.
2. Avoid **showboating**. Your inquiry should be sincere; people will sense if you're just trying to impress the crowd.

"We'd now like to open the floor to shorter speeches disguised as questions."

Networking 101: email people about their work

The first rule of academics+email is: **We hate dealing with email**

The second rule of academics+email is: **We love getting email... when**

1. The email is about our own work;
2. The email sender has actually read our work in detail, and shows they have understood it at a deep level;
3. The sender has a thoughtful and sincere question about the work; and
4. The inquiry might actually lead to collaboration or followup work.

The important point: if you've read someone's work, you understood it, but feel like there are still some open questions, then email the authors! They will appreciate this more than you realize.

Discussion

Any thoughts/questions?

Thank you!

And thanks to organizers!