

# Master the art of networking

Shy? Introverted? Better with numbers than network building? Convinced that everyone else is more articulate and experienced than you? Whatever your concerns, Peter Bartram explains how to overcome them and transform yourself into an effective networker

THE  
RELUCTANT  
NETWORKER

THE  
RELATIONSHIP  
BUILDER

THE  
CONSUMMATE  
COMMUNICATOR

**L**aura Capindale is about to embark on the greatest challenge of her accountancy career. Her mouth is dry. Butterflies are performing acrobatics in her stomach. And in a few minutes, she will have to stand before a crowd of 70 accountants, managers and business owners, and make a 30-second pitch about her firm.

A bell will ring to time her out if she overruns, even by one second, so she has spent the last few weeks worrying about how to reduce her pitch to fewer than 80 words. But there is no time left to worry because the chairman is introducing her. She rises and starts to speak...

And as she sits down, the bell rings. She has timed her words to perfection. But something else also happens: everyone in the room cheers. Laura's 'elevator pitch' has been a triumph.

Welcome to the world of networking where the tough challenges are matched by rich rewards for those brave enough to seize them.

Laura, 30, a manager in the Lincoln office of Duncan & Toplis, an East Midlands accountancy practice, decided early on in her career that she needed as much skill in networking as in number-crunching, which is why she attended this fortnightly networking event organised by The Business Club in Lincolnshire. "I thought it would get me ahead faster than sitting at a desk," she says.

However, this also meant overcoming her natural shyness. "At my first events, I was daunted by meeting more experienced business professionals," she explains. "I would take a deep breath before I stepped into the room, put on my best smile, try to relax and just be myself."

Laura has trained herself to become a consummate networker - the kind others love to meet. Yet not everyone succeeds.

Researching this feature, I was regaled with horror stories of disastrous networking attempts and crass behaviour. There is the accountant who stood at the door, handing out his business cards to everyone who came in - and then left; another who became a little too familiar with the free champagne; and a number of others who carved into chatting groups by freezing out an existing member - only to be cold-shouldered by the rest.

These mistakes all boil down to one problem, says Mark Rhodes, author of *How to Talk to Absolutely Anyone* - young accountants often fail to take networking seriously.

"Many of them consider networking a waste of time because they don't like [doing] it," he says. "They see business relationships being developed by the partners, and wonder why they should bother to network when the partners take all the glory."

## THE SHY ACCOUNTANT'S GUIDE TO WORKING A ROOM

*You're at your first networking event. The room is crowded. You know no one. You're psyching yourself up to walk in... What should you do next?* **Jack Downton**, who runs executive training company *The Influence Business*, suggests this three-step approach.

**1.** Take a good look around the room. Note the people who are talking in groups, those in pairs and those standing alone. A natural impulse is to join another singleton. Beware. There may be a good reason why they're on their own.

**2.** Next, consider the pairs. The body language is the key here. If they're standing face to face with their feet parallel to one another, their body language is saying: don't interrupt - we're having a private conversation. If they're standing as though they were two sides of a triangle, they're receptive to others and you may consider moving forward to make the third side of the triangle.

**3.** Finally, study the groups. These may be your best option. Spot the person who seems to be the leader. (This is usually the one doing the most talking). Move into their eyeline, catch their eye and smile. Finally, move forward and say: "Hi, may I join you?"

What they're forgetting is that the route to a partner's chair or a senior accountancy post is often through a network of valued business contacts.

Yet some of the most effective networkers are "reluctant networkers", according to Neil Munz-Jones, author of *The Reluctant Networker*. "There are lots of different ways to network and one of the most effective is to deepen existing relationships rather than starting new ones," he says.

He points out that many people who go to networking events come away with a stack of business cards but do nothing with them. However, effective networking is all about following up useful contacts after the first meeting.

"Networking is a lasting approach to doing business with people," he explains. "It should be a life-long [relationship] - not something done just because you need something."

Andy Lopata, who has coached scores of accountants in networking skills, agrees that networking is not about selling. As he puts it: "It's about finding people you have a rapport with and developing relationships."


Listening rather than talking is one of the most effective skills a good networker possesses, he advises. But the best networkers also use some gamesmanship. For example, nervous people often turn up late at an event when the room is already crowded. "It's better to come before others arrive," advises Rhodes.

"That gives you time to speak to the organiser and find out who else is coming. It's also a good idea to ask for the organiser's help in introducing you to the people you really want to meet. Not only will it take the awkwardness out of the situation, you'll also get straight to the people who matter."

In other words, it's a great way to have a head start over everyone else in the room. Laura is in no doubt that, for young accountants, networking is more important than ever.

"I've found that, as an accountant in modern times, you need more than just technical skills," she says. "You need to understand the issues affecting the businesses you deal with from day to day. The best way is to get out and speak to people."

But is networking really a route to career success? Yes, says Laura. "It gives you a lot more confidence and skills that you don't necessarily learn by being in an office." ■

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