

COLUMN

Courting connections

In the search for a job, contacts matter. **Peter J. Feibelman** explains how to assemble a personal ‘old boy’ network while still a PhD student or postdoc.

When job openings are scarce, an advertisement for a research position is likely to attract dozens, even hundreds, of applications. Will they all be read? It's unlikely. And this raises questions: how can you expect to be invited for an interview if your painstakingly written application letter is not seriously reviewed? How can you ensure that your CV will get to the top of the pile and be read — and that you will have at least a chance to vie for the job?

A good way to start is to determine how others have succeeded — and to reflect on whether you can follow their approach. You might be tempted to dismiss that idea, attributing your predecessors' good fortune to the legendary ‘old boy’ network, to which you do not belong. This is not an unreasonable thought; connections to established scientists are often helpful. Whether spontaneous or requested, a timely, enthusiastic call from your successful colleague's prominent supervisor or mentor to a prospective employer may well have led to an interview invitation.

Still, wallowing in envy will not improve your job prospects. A more effective approach, if you can muster the psychological resources, is to throw off passivity, self-doubt and self-pity, and adopt the active mode. Ask yourself how you can establish a network of your own. You can do it by drawing attention to your abilities and accomplishments, and by starting early enough that people will get to know you as a scientific colleague, not just another job seeker.

You can begin at your desk. Have you read a stimulating paper related to your work? Has it raised compelling questions? Could interacting with the author help you to make progress? If the answer to any of these is yes, try initiating an e-mail exchange with him or her. Not only could you learn something that has a bearing on your current research, but when you start looking for a job, your correspondent might recall your inquiry or critique, and be willing to work on your behalf.

On the home front, you could lead a journal-club session on a paper that you have found exciting. Run the topic past someone more experienced — perhaps a researcher working in a related area — and, if his or her response is encouraging, ask for time to make

a departmental presentation. That will be good practice in any case; it never hurts to polish your speaking skills. More importantly, your scientific leadership will be perceived as valuable. You can win respect and support by alerting colleagues to significant results, or by persuasively arguing for a new research direction.

In a university or lab, communication tends to happen within groups rather than between them, so you and your organization stand to

conference, scan the abstracts — they are probably available on the Internet. Pick out those most relevant to your interests, then download recent papers by their authors. Go to the gathering with questions, and meet selected speakers after their sessions end. Tell them what you have been doing — what issues your research has already resolved, what still baffles you — and ask them if they would have time for a chat.

Will you be travelling? Is there a lab near your destination at which you might like to work one day? Perhaps you can arrange to visit. Or, if you are staying at home, you could send a note asking to spend a week or a month there during the summer. Depending on the host lab's policy, they might let you visit informally for a few days or weeks, or ask you to apply for an internship. If you do arrange a stay, and make a positive impression, your chances of landing a job later are likely to improve. It is easier for an employer to hire someone whom he or she has met and sized up, than someone who has come for a brief interview, and whose recommendations might be inflated. Aim to be the person that your potential employer already knows.

The theme connecting these ideas is that the way to gain recognition as a scientist is to act like one. Although being in the lab or at your computer is necessary for your research project, budgeting time week-to-week to engage with the scientific community at home and on the outside is not a diversion but an essential activity, part of the life of every working scientist. It is also how you establish your own old boy network.

Do not imagine that you can lock yourself in a lab or office until your research project is almost complete, then burst successfully onto the job market in the few months before your pay cheque stops coming. That is a recipe for stress, not for landing an interview. It is better to court invitations to apply for the research job you would like — and a successful courtship is not an overnight project. ■

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profit if you can encourage interaction across group or departmental divisions. Set aside time to learn what people outside your group are working on — they will be pleased by your interest. Attend their seminars and talks. If your expertise might be of use to them, engage them in dialogue. When you solicit recommendation letters, they will know who you are and what you have to offer.

Scientific meetings are opportunities to publicize your research results, to learn what others are doing and to broaden your perspective. They are also a prime venue for meeting potential employers. Before you attend a