Lifelong friendships bloom frequently at happy hours and parties, and those relationships can generate research collaborations, job opportunities and more. At a biogeography meeting in Mexico a few years ago, Gill met another graduate student who became a friend, a regular roommate at subsequent conferences and later, a lab-mate. Similarly, Vasiliver-Shamis met her future postdoc supervisor at a meeting of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology when he started chatting with her at a poster presentation that she was giving. "Everyone you meet is like an interview," she says. "Just be aware. You don't know when you're going to meet this person next."

For Jonathan Tennant, a palaeontologist at Imperial College London, conferences have even provided a personal-life boost. He met his girlfriend at a social gathering at the 2014 Society of Vertebrate Paleontology meeting in Berlin. And he has stayed or toured with friends in foreign cities after getting to know them at conferences or befriending them first on Twitter and then connecting in person at a meeting. "I've got so many great friends all over the world now," he says. "It's useful to have seeds like that everywhere."

Although conference parties are natural places to make friends, there are social pitfalls to watch out for. Alcohol often flows freely at these events, Gill says, and she has seen students get too drunk to attend presentations and posters — including their own — the next day. It doesn't help career prospects to be the person who is known for indiscriminate behaviour of any sort, she points out. "You're around all the people who are going to make decisions about your future — the people who are going to review your papers, who are going to decide if they want to give you a scholarship or a research grant or a postdoc," she says.

"You should not be afraid to go up and introduce yourself or ask for their opinions about your research."

Despite all the 'dos' and 'don'ts' involved in conference etiquette, veterans say that major gaffes are actually quite rare. Most often, attendees who use good judgement go home with new knowledge, contacts and friends. That is true even for first-timers. "I was surprised how unbelievably warm and welcoming everyone was to me and other new people," Shiffman recalls of his first conference. Now in the fifth year of his PhD programme, he has been to 29 conferences with many more to come. "They have," he says, "made a big impact on my life." ■

Emily Sohn *is a freelance journalist in Minneapolis.*

TURNING POINT
Alaina Levine

PETE BROWN

When science-careers consultant and author Alaina Levine gained her undergraduate mathematics degree, she was told that it would be useful only in academia or accountancy. Deciding those were not for her, she has been running a career-coaching business since 2004 and in June published her first book, Networking for Nerds *(Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).*

What did you set out to do at university?

I wanted to be an astrophysicist. I went to the University of Arizona to pursue an astrophysics degree, but had to write programs to analyse data. My light-bulb moment came when I found myself doing nothing but writing and running these programmes — I didn't get the opportunity to look at the cosmos, or to discuss it with anyone. I realized that this might not be the kind of career I wanted.

What was your next choice?

At the end of my first year, I switched to a major in mathematics, because I still loved the elegance of the numbers. I thought I would get a PhD in maths and become a mathematician. I had this romantic view — I imagined myself in a think tank with a beautiful view of a river, talking to intellectuals all day. But when I asked my adviser what I could do with a maths degree, he said that there was nothing, apart from becoming a professor or going into actuarial studies.

How did you respond?

I was dismayed, but also realized that he had experienced only the tenure-track career path. In hindsight, any discipline in science, technology, engineering or maths serves you in many valuable ways, and can help to create careers that you did not know existed, or that did not even exist before. For example, my maths background has helped me significantly in public speaking and comedy, because it gave me critical planning and analysis tools. For every joke I craft and make during a speech, I think about what the outcomes of that joke will be. I map out tactics two to three steps ahead.

How did you switch careers?

I had done public-engagement work for the physics department at the University of Arizona, which prepared me for a job as director of communications for the department, and I stayed for four years. After that, I became the director of special projects in the college of science at the university, where I developed its professional science master's programme.

What was your remit?

Part of my job was to get my students jobs. I had to talk to employers about their needs, go back to the students and teach them those things. I started teaching the soft skills that students were not getting as part of their scientific training, such as how to search and interview for a job, how to get a job, how to network.

Why did you decide to write a book?

As a careers consultant and when I give talks, I've interacted with scientists who think that networking is a negative action — it takes time away from being in the lab. Or they are uncomfortable going to meet people they do not know, and so won't bother. I wanted to stress that networking can help scientists, and that there are things they can do to calm themselves and boost their confidence. For example, they can start conversations on an aeroplane. The more they do this in scenarios where they do not feel pressure, the more confident they will be in settings such as professional conferences.

What have you learned about scientists' soft skills?

Scientists are naturally curious — and scientific training actually helps researchers to become better networkers because it is based on asking questions, which they do anyway. The most interesting thing is that scientists are networking, but they're just calling it something else, like 'discussing the opportunity to collaborate'. As they improve these skills, they understand how beneficial networking is and how much it is a part of the scientific method. The sooner they realize this, the sooner they can put it to effective use. ■

INTERVIEW BY JULIE GOULD

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.