■ **XENOPHON KOUFTEROS, Feature Editor, Texas A&M University**

"Hi, I'm Me": Judicious Networking for the Doctoral Student

by Varun Grover, Clemson University

Varun Grover

is the William S. Lee (Duke Energy) Distinguished Professor of Information Systems at the College of Business & Behavioral Sciences, Clemson University. Dr. Grover has published extensively in the IS field, with over 160 publications in refereed journals. Five recent articles have ranked him among the top five researchers based on publications in major IS journals over the past decade. He currently serves as senior editor of MIS Quarterly, Journal of the AIS, *and* Database *and associate editor for* JMIS, JOM, *and* IJEC, *among others. He is a recipient of the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Decision Sciences Institute, and has also received numerous recognitions for his research and teaching.*

vgrover@clemson.edu

We've all known someone like him. He surveys the room, evaluating every person. Some are discounted off the bat. Some are placed at a premium. Where can he get the biggest return? Who needs to know him? Who does he need to know? After careful assessment, he smoothly snuggles into an ongoing conversation. They accommodate. They chatter. He thinks nothing of moving to another group—when he sees the possibility for a higher return on his investment. It doesn't matter who he is with. It doesn't matter why he is there. What matters is who he knows and who he is seen with. He is the *networker*.

As someone who generally abhors people who behave like the networker above, I am perhaps not the best person to be talking about networking. I am closer to the other extreme; working on the arguably naïve assumption that putting your head down and working hard to get your work out is the best avenue for success. I don't network. I've been known to hide my nametag and actively avoid networking at conferences. However, over the years I've come to realize that networking is not necessarily a bad word. If done judiciously, it can serve as a catalyst to enhance relationships, contribute positively to the quality of your work and enhance your position in the academic community. On the other hand, selfish networking, epitomized in the vignette above, might work temporarily if done by someone who exhibits a certain level of competence. Ultimately however, the selfish networker will be known as just that—selfish. If networking is all the person has to offer, the house of cards will collapse. Selfish networking is not sustainable.

So, what is judicious networking? How should a doctoral student judiciously network? If we look at the stages a doctoral student goes through in the program (see "How Am I Doing? Checklist for Doctoral Students at Various Stages of Their Program," *Decision Line*, March 2006, pp.24-26), we can contextualize these questions. Most doctoral students come into their program rather naïve about research and the institutions supporting it. This is the "stage of exploration" where, to the wonderment of some, they are exposed to knowledge in their field, its basic structures and the prominent people behind the knowledge and structures. In the next year, the "stage of engagement," students engage with research projects and faculty as they sense their path through the program. The "stage of consolidation" is where they should have a sense of both their personal research as well as a schema of the broader field and its constituents. Finally, in the "stage of entry" students can leverage the previous stages as they seek formal entry into the profession. Where does networking fit into all this?

In general, students need to begin their networking within their home institution. During the stage of exploration, and particularly the stage of engagement, it is important that students get to know their own faculty. It would not be inappropriate for students to approach faculty—particularly those in their major area—and introduce themselves. At the minimum, having faculty be aware of their existence and better still, cultivating institutional (faculty) support for their candidacy is an important goal of networking. While it may not be practical for a student to work on projects with every

faculty member, engaging faculty on content by seeking advice helps achieve this goal. As we discuss later, students should build relationships, not mere contacts. In order to avoid getting pulled in too many different directions, students can establish special kinds of relationships with different faculty. From faculty that might eventually serve on their committee they could try to get content-based advice. From others, they can obtain process-based advice on navigating the program, or advice on a methodological issue. Ultimately, if the faculty get to know a student as motivated, competent, and one who does not shy away from hard work, this will hold the student in good stead during the later stages of the doctoral program.

During consolidation and entry, students will need to straddle the line between their internal institution and the broader professional context they are about to enter. External networking can help in this regard. There is a good chance that if students can develop some strong external relationships, those relationships will sustain through a good portion of their professional career.

Below, I add some granularity to the concept of "judicious" networking. I organize this subtext in the form of five rules. While some of my colleagues may find these rules too conservative, I think students need to network carefully lest they be viewed as selfish networkers that forces their way onto others. Underlying these rules is the assumption that networking is a two-way street, and relationships are built on mutual benefit.

Network on Content

When doctoral students attend professional conferences, they often seek introductions to well-known people. In my experience, this rarely leads to anything other than (perhaps) a casual exchange of names (which the well-known person usually forgets). It is nice when doctoral students find themselves in a social situation at a conference. Going out for dinner with some bigwigs can be an illuminating experience. If the student has a dazzling personality, associations can be forged, and this could lead to good outcomes.

However, while in most cases professional associations have non-professional discussions as conversation starters, they are usually sustained on professional content and common interests. Purely social relationships are nice and enjoyable—but they typically remain at that level. Therefore, the best networking is based on discussing common professional interests. If, for instance, a doctoral student is working on a thesis that builds on someone's work, it is entirely appropriate to touch base with that person and discuss how his work is being used. This is better done with a prearranged meeting, but on occasion even approaching the person at a conference might work. In the latter case, it is important for doctoral students to recognize that social gatherings at conferences might not be the right setting for detailed academic discussion. The key point is that by focusing on content—in a manner that is interesting to the other party—the student comes across as *interesting*. At the minimum, the approached party is now aware of the student and her work and can provide useful feedback. More importantly, with appropriate follow ups the student and the approached party can build a professional relationship. Social interactions can lead to or leverage professional associations—but for sustainability the latter is critical.

Network When You Don't Have To

Network to give without expecting anything back in return. If a doctoral student is on the job market, casual interactions with attendees at a social gathering rarely lead to positive outcomes, and in some cases can hurt one's candidacy. In these settings, the approached party is not necessarily in a working mode. If they are recruiting, they have probably already spent time going through resumes and interviewing numerous candidates. They may already have many satisfactory candidates for the position. Unless a doctoral student can "wow" them under such unfavorable conditions, the student is more likely to be viewed as anything from unfortunate to a downright pest. Similarly, approaching an editor of a journal and asking for detailed feedback

on a paper one is working on should be done carefully. Be aware of the setting. Try not to come across as a taker. For instance, it is entirely appropriate to ask an editor about the fit of a paper. But to demand more than that in a casual setting with the idea of building a relationship is not apropos. It is far better to network when you don't have to. When there is a genuine interest in the other person's work or advice, you are giving respect, exchanging interesting ideas, and perhaps at the embryonic stages of building a relationship. In cases where the person has graciously responded, students should be equally gracious in return—perhaps offering to help them with something they might need in the future. This shows that the student is concerned about the responder as a person and not just what they can do for them.

Also, it is important to network not only with faculty, but also with fellow doctoral students. Cultivating such relationships through doctoral forums (e.g., consortia, blogs) can be important as students and their peers grow together professionally. Given the common career stage or peers, some of these relationships could turn out to be very strong and continue for years. They could also lead to important faculty relationships at the peer's institution. At the minimum, good peer networking can help doctoral students benchmark themselves and gauge their competition as they prepare for placement.

Network On-Line

In today's environment there is no need to network physically. In fact, the relatively non-invasive nature of e-mail allows students to communicate and exchange documents with unknown entities. E-mail is a great tool for establishing a solid content-based foundation for a relationship. In this medium, a carefully worded request, feedback on a paper, or an exchange of ideas can go a long way in establishing awareness, credibility, and even fostering a working relationship. I know of many researchers who have successfully published papers with people they have never even met! It offers a great social opening when two co-authors

actually see each other face-to-face. Doctoral students should avail themselves of this resource and not hesitate to contact others in the field regarding work related questions. Perhaps a clarification is needed on a statement made in a paper? Perhaps advice is needed on a certain methodology? Perhaps an opinion is needed on a completed paper? In each case, the requestor should be cognizant of the recipient's time and try to ensure that the recipient benefits from helping with the request. The requestor should also be sensitive to cues in the exchange in order to see whether any mutual benefit is evolving into a sustained series of interactions. Also, doctoral student blogs and online communities are springing up and they offer a great resource to forge relationships with other doctoral students or faculty who are in similar positions or share the same interests.

Network Gently

A pushy networker like the one in the opening paragraph is more often than not viewed as intrusive and unwanted. People are generally polite—particularly academic types—and may not give out obvious cues as to their true disposition. In some cases, the networker is not even aware of their pushy propensity. I would generally advocate that doctoral students should figuratively have their antenna out. They can control their behavior–and "barging into" an ongoing group conversation should be one behavior to control. Even worse is barging in and monopolizing the conversation without being fully contextualized as to what was being discussed. Better practice is to be invited into a group or gently make one's way into a group that has not established a tight cohesion. It's generally good form, particularly as a doctoral student, to be a good listener and offer insight on topics where the student has had some experience. Shooting from the hip in order to impress a crowd usually causes the opposite reaction. Some doctoral students (particularly those in the job market) tend to stalk their target. I doubt that stalking works—and again it has the danger of backfiring.

Network Prepared

Whether a student is networking online or in person, it always helps to be prepared. The quality of the content exchanged will be far superior if the student is well aware of the person being approached and what they can and cannot do. For instance, requesting detailed information on the data from a 20-year old paper may not be a good request. Awareness of the methodologist on a 3-person paper can ensure that the request is targeted to the right person. Even in physical networking, awareness of the other party's work will lead to a far more substantive content-based conversation—and a higher likelihood of a more sustained relationship. Also, students must be responsive and follow-up with their contacts. Sustained relationships are built and are not formed overnight. This requires work—and a willingness to invest in building the relationship.

In sum, judicious networking is a far cry from our initial vignette. Much of it involves good social etiquette, tact, and basic decency. I suggest that students who network based on mutual interests and professional content, do it in an altruistic manner, establish and nurture communication links online, are diplomatic and non-intrusive, and work hard to build and cultivate contacts will be able to use networking to increase the quality of their work and their opportunity set in the profession. On the other hand the consummate networker will not sustain.

It is important to repeat that networking is about building relationships. Having hundreds of weak ties might not be as fruitful as having a few strong ties in the discipline. Most initial contacts fizzle out due to a lack of substance in the interactions. The ones that do sustain help establish a sense of belongingness in the community and can contribute greatly to success in the profession. ∎