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## **Work Speak: The Right Way to Network**

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Networking used to make me cringe. It felt dirty and didn't come naturally to me. I would enter a networking event and find a seat in the very last row, preferably the corner with the least amount of

light. I would much rather spend lunch breaks cleaning up my inbox than meeting new people. I joined virtual group meetings a minute late so I didn't have to indulge in small talk.

It wasn't until I took on my first management role that I realized how critical networking and building relationships is. Not only does it open up a sea of opportunities, but it's also a great way to learn and exchange knowledge. Building and nurturing professional relationships has also shown to improve the quality of work and increase job satisfaction.

If you, like me, shy away from networking or don't know how to start conversations, here are some tips sourced from our experts to help you get started. While it may not be easy or fun, there's plenty of evidence that it's important.

### **Focus on what you'll ask, not say.**

Meeting someone new at a networking event? Fear of stilted small talk, long silences, or grammar mistakes can paralyze you from engaging. Instead of worrying about what you're going to say to the other person, put together a list of questions you might want to ask them. Look up their LinkedIn profile ahead of time and look for things you have in common. Use those commonalities to draft a few questions on topics that you'll both find interesting and useful.

**Instead of saying:** "How long have you been working in STEM education?"

**Try:** Your posts on edtech in the STEM education forum were really thought-provoking! I've interned for a few startups in this space and am excited about my own next steps — but I definitely could use some guidance from someone more experienced. What do you think the most critical skills are for someone who wants to succeed in this field?

## **Pay attention to the things they care about.**

If you want to get to know a colleague better, pay attention to what they share during meetings. What topics are they passionate about? What kind of hobbies do they engage in outside of work? Where did they go to school or grow up? If you can relate in any way, that will be an easy in — but even if you don't, you can use that information to initiate a discussion.

**Instead of saying:** I would love to get to know you better.

**Try:** Hi! I am [name] and I joined [number] days ago. I heard during the virtual happy hour that you're learning Spanish on Duolingo. I was excited to hear that as I'm interested in studying a second language too. How's that going? Would you like to meet for coffee and chat a bit more sometime?

## **Move from small talk to deep talk.**

When you connect with someone new, your natural inclination may be to ask standard small-talk questions like, "What do you do?" or "Where are you from?" While many people believe that intense chats should be reserved for close friends, studies show that this belief is misguided. In comparison to "small talk," intimate conversations are correlated with higher levels of happiness and people find satisfaction in meaningful conversations.

**Instead of asking:** What do you do?

**Try:** How do you deliver value to others through your work? What problems do you help others solve? What aspects of your work do you most enjoy and why? What do you least enjoy and why? What gives you the most meaning, satisfaction and joy at work? What aspects energize and excite you?

## **Make it purposeful.**

Transactional networking, or networking done only with the purpose of advancement, can make the other person feel used. On the other hand, networking done with the intention of making

connections and exchanging knowledge benefits both parties and feels more authentic. It also triggers our reciprocity bias, which states that the people we help are more likely to help us in return.

If you need a favor from someone, try offering to help them with something else first.

**Instead of saying:** I just wondered if you had any openings at your new company.

**Try:** Hi! I hope you're well. I just read about your job switch. That's wonderful — congratulations! I recently came across this report on macroeconomic factors affecting [industry, company, or field] and I thought I'd share it with you. Let's keep in touch.

The truth is, avoiding networking can be a career-limiting and potentially career-stalling move. If meeting strangers outside the office intimidates you, start networking laterally within your organization until you feel more confident and comfortable. You'll learn valuable lessons in a safer space and continually improve along the way.

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