

Why your nursing networks matter

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN, and Tanya M. Cohn, PhD, MEd, RN

● Networks help you advance your career, provide high-quality care, and support your colleagues.

Maria is a direct-care nurse working on a medical/surgical unit in an acute-care hospital. She recently achieved certification and became a member of a national nursing organization for her specialty, both of which are needed to advance through the clinical ladder at work. However, Maria isn't sure why her hospital values membership in the national organization or how it will help her career. She has a busy personal life and doesn't have time to volunteer in her local chapter.

MARIA'S LACK of understanding about the value of professional networks isn't unusual. Many nurses never make the investment of getting involved with professional associations or take the time to ensure that they have a strong network of colleagues within and outside their own organization. They wonder why they should spend what free time they have on an activity that seems so indirectly related to their work, and they fail to see how a network can enhance their professional growth or be a wise career investment.

The value of professional networks

Maria, like all direct-care nurses, is part of the profession of nursing. As a member of the profession, she has the opportunity to develop through continuing education, certification, and membership in nursing organizations. These activities will help Maria evolve from a novice to an expert nurse and open doors to professional networks. Professional networks also will provide her with mentorship, support, and teamwork opportunities. For example, if Maria's interested in developing specific skills or advancing her education, she can use her network to identify a mentor for skill development or guidance on educational opportunities.

Professional networks are crucially connected to quality patient care. Specifically, healthcare demands evidence-based practice, but nurses across the nation



frequently are faced with variations in patient care and deep-rooted sacred cows of practice that are neither evidence-based nor current. Working in silos of individual clinical settings, nurses are left with less-than-optimal patient care and the need to develop evidence-based solutions from scratch. This is where professional networks can promote evidence-based practice through collaboration. For example, as a member of a national organization, Maria has access to networking with other medical/surgical nurses. Together they can compare and share best practices or research findings from their clinical practice, reducing the need to re-create the wheel individually. The result is consistent evidence-based, high-quality patient care.

For young nurses like Maria, a strong network can help when looking for new career opportunities. Many positions are never advertised, and workforce recruiters acknowledge that their best referrals come from professionals whose judgment they trust. Today's healthcare environment is volatile, so building a strong network should be part of a professional insurance policy.

Steps to building a network

Building a professional network can take two paths: a network in your immediate clinical environment or one created through an organization. Both require common steps.

Expert advice

Put these best practices from networking experts at Essential Communications into action.

1. **Networking is about planting, not hunting.** Professional relationships are built over time. Never reach out to network and then abruptly ask for a job.
2. **Effective networkers add value to others.** When networking, adopt a mindset of abundance not scarcity. Think about what you can do for the other person first. Perhaps you can connect him or her with a colleague or share an interesting article. The best networkers are givers not takers.
3. **Build a professional image.** Make a

positive professional impression by having an up-to-date LinkedIn page, a professional email address and outgoing phone message, and business cards.

4. **Be prepared.** Networking opportunities can occur in the most unlikely settings. Always carry business cards and be ready to build a relationship.
5. **Craft your elevator speech.** When you're asked, "What do you do" or "What are you looking for," have a short, coherent answer that easily rolls off your tongue.
6. **Be positive.** Don't complain about anything to people you network with—you're building a relationship, not seeking therapy.

7. **Share the airtime.** The best way to begin building a relationship is to ask other people about themselves and their careers. Spend as much time listening as you do talking.
8. **Follow up consistently.** If you've been helped by another, send a thank-you note. If you've been given some homework, get it done and provide follow-up.
9. **Dig your well before you're thirsty.** By the time you need to build relationships, it may be too late; they take time to cultivate. Networking should be an ongoing professional investment.

Source: Essential Communications. essentialcomm.com

First, establish an understanding of your goals and who can help you achieve them. For Maria, this could include using her knowledge and experience as a certified medical/surgical nurse to establish a unit-based education program or to take part in a unit-based council to work collectively with other nurses through evidence-based practice and nurse competencies. Maria also might be interested in tapping into the nursing organization she's joined to seek out up-to-date practice alerts. Regardless of the professional network, after goals are set and the right people are identified, you can interact, share knowledge, and receive plans to help you achieve your goals.

If you don't have a specific goal in mind, building a professional network might seem daunting or unclear. Start by putting yourself out there in the nursing profession. For Maria, who may not be able to commit to joining a committee within the nursing organization, she can plan to attend the organization's annual conference. While there, she can take steps to maximize the networking experience. First, she should think about some conversational topics and introductory questions to use when interacting with other attendees. Depending on Maria's professional goals, the topics and questions could revolve around clinical practice, leadership development, or advancing education. In addition, Maria should be professionally prepared for the conference, including wearing professional attire and taking business cards. She also should plan to attend all social events and interact with the conference vendors, who could be potential future employment opportunities or offer cutting-edge evidence-

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based products she can share with her clinical colleagues.

The golden rules of networking

Networking opportunities exist everywhere, including online with sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Many nursing organizations have Facebook and Twitter accounts that nurses can follow to support networking about clinical practice and professional development. LinkedIn, on the other hand, helps nurses identify mentors and

colleagues with similar interests. Regardless of whether you're networking at a conference, within an organization, or online, you'll need to follow some rules. (See *Expert advice*.)

Networking for introverts

If you're naturally introverted, networking may not come easily. You may even avoid networking events because they're exhausting and force you outside your comfort zone. The hardest part can be walking through the door into a room. Fortunately, most people would rather talk than listen, so let others do the talking. You can never go wrong asking questions and establishing common ground. (See *Get the conversation started*.) Chances are that once you start asking questions, the conversation will flow easily. Most nurses like to be asked about their opinions and sought out for advice. You'll be seen as a great networker because you take the time to listen.

Join the networked world

Over the course of her career, Maria will learn that

Get the conversation started

Use these questions to jumpstart conversations at networking events.

- How did you get started in your role?
- What are your challenges?
- What significant changes are you seeing in your environment?
- What's the most innovative thing that's happening in your organization?
- What do you think will happen with healthcare reform?
- What trends do you see happening in nursing today?
- What advice would you give to an emerging nurse leader?
- How can I help you?
- Who else at this meeting would be helpful for me to speak with?

building a network is one of the most powerful opportunities that membership in a professional association can provide. A good network outside her clinical setting will help her gain access to and act on new information quickly. She'll also save time and energy by accessing other professionals who've overcome some of the same challenges she's facing. Many young nurses have fast-tracked their careers by getting involved

with association committees or running for office.

We live in a networked world, so developing your networking skill set is important to your career success. You never know what new opportunities you'll encounter or who you'll meet until you extend your hand, introduce yourself, and start asking questions. ★

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