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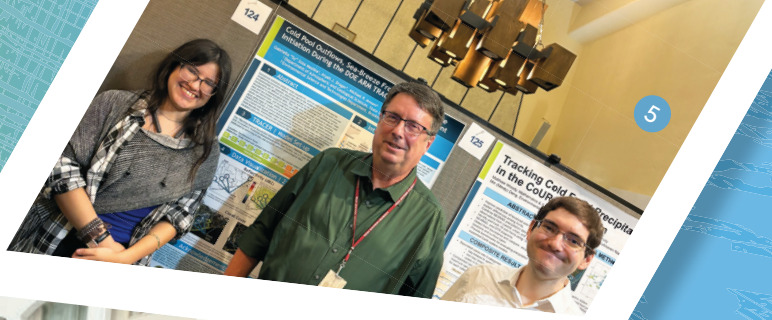
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How to build long-lasting professional relationships

Anne Marie Porter and Trevor Owens

Interviews with 22 successful early-career physical scientists and engineers reveal that networking has been one of the most critical ways to nurture their careers.















(Background texture adapted from iStock.com/enjoynz.)

A successful career is rarely created on its own. Rather, for building one, networking is often a must. Professional relationships with colleagues and others can provide, among other benefits, job search assistance, mentorship and social support, and access to new information and ideas.[1] Networking leads to long-term career benefits too: Those who network the most have reported the greatest career satisfaction and the fastest salary growth.[2]

Students pursuing a physics or astronomy degree recently reported that career uncertainty is the biggest issue facing them. (For more on the most pressing concerns of students, see the June 2026 *PT* article by Shannon Clardy, Brad Conrad, and Matthew Wright.) Understanding how successful scientists develop professional relationships has thus become especially important. But what do scientists who are particularly effective at cultivating professional relationships do?

Our research team at the American Institute of Physics (AIP, publisher of *Physics Today*) interviewed 22 early-career scientists and engineers who have been recognized as influential volunteer leaders in the professional societies and communities that are part of the AIP federation.[3] As they described their career paths and volunteering opportunities to us, networking emerged as one of the most consistent themes. Their experiences revealed remarkably consistent patterns in how enduring professional relationships develop and how communities of colleagues who support one another form.

In this article, we highlight several of the strategic approaches that those early-career scientists and engineers used to build professional relationships. You'll hear from several of the interviewees, in their own words, about the experiences and perspectives that have shaped their careers.

Prioritize in-person interactions

The early-career professionals we talked with emphasized that in-person conferences and events play a central role in developing trusted career relationships. Conferences can offer numerous networking opportunities, such as speed networking sessions, lunches or dinners for early-career professionals or students, career-path panels, career fairs, science trivia nights, and poster sessions.



As UCLA postdoc William Munizzi, a member of the American Physical Society (APS), said, "It's very important to network face-to-face with people, and this is an opportunity that can only really be done by students attending these conferences. . . . It will ultimately help you in your career. . . . The beauty of collaborative science and having these in-person conversations is discussing with your research peers and people who are doing work, parallel to you, but on the other side of the world."

Before events, early-career professionals can plan and schedule one-on-one networking opportunities with potential graduate advisers, employers, or collaborators. APS member Ari Jain, a PhD student at Georgia Tech and regular attendee at the annual meeting of the society's division of fluid dynamics, shared, "I looked up what professors would likely be there and reached out: 'Hey, I'll be at the DFD. Can we arrange a time to chat?' . . . There were a couple of people from employers that I reached out to: 'Hey, can we have a chat and talk?' It was an amazing opportunity to meet all those people."



Unplanned, spontaneous networking interactions at conferences and other events are equally valuable for starting lasting professional relationships. Leaving room in your event schedule to mingle with those around you may lead to unexpected career benefits.



Katie Burzynski—a senior engineer at the Air Force Research Laboratory and a member of AVS, a professional society focused on the science and technology of materials, interfaces, and processing—said, "It's about that coffee you accidentally had with somebody at a conference that's going to be the person that hires you in your next role. It's not going to be cold-responding to all these job boards. . . . I think there's still a lot of people that are uncertain in hiring roles. . . . They will take that personal relationship with someone and value that much higher than just a blank résumé that made it through the scanner."

Think across disciplines

Networking builds a set of relationships that deepen over the course of a career. As connec-



▲ At the 2026 AIP Annual Forum in March, a four-member panel of early-career scientists reflected on their experiences with their member societies and how the societies have helped them develop their careers and have given them leadership opportunities in their scientific communities. (Photo courtesy of AIP.)

tions accumulate, networks offer more flexibility and open new possibilities when circumstances change. During our interviews, early-career professionals talked about networking in the long term, beyond immediate outcomes of a specific job or recommendation.



Tim Stachowski is a bioinformatics researcher at St Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, and has been a member of the American Crystallographic Association (ACA) since 2017. He recounted, "Eddie, my supervisor, he would say it all the time, You're going to go to these workshops, and you're going to see them for the next 30 or 40 years of your career. And in a lot of ways, he was right. Science on some level is so huge, you don't realize people on the other side of the globe are doing the same thing. But then science can feel very small, and all of a sudden you're in the same room."

Many scientific problems are increasingly studied through an interdisciplinary lens, and scientists are developing connections across fields, sectors, and industries. Early-career professionals told us that such connections gave them opportunities to learn what they can uniquely contribute and to generate new ideas and collaborations.



Carlos Martinez, a member of the American Meteorological Society (AMS) and a former participant in its Early Career Leadership Academy, said of the experience, "You meet with folks who are in different career paths in weather, water, climate, and get to speak about their journey, some of the challenges, what are the opportunities, how to lead

as an early-career professional. So it was a very rewarding experience as well, because I got the opportunity to network with other folks who are from different career paths, and then also the opportunity to learn how I could leverage my skill set in climate modeling and simulation, for example, in, you know, public policy or in other sectors." Martinez is now a senior climate scientist in Washington, DC, at the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Contribute and volunteer

Networking is mutual support, not self-promotion. Supporting others and engaging in collective work not only strengthens communities but also creates relationships with meaningful impacts over time. One place to start is to attend talks, discussions, and events—whether they're at an annual meeting, hosted by your academic department, or online—where others share their work.



Rachael Merritt, who is a member of the American Association of Physics Teachers (AAPT) and now works at NSF, recalled the benefit of staying in contact with a cohort of peers that she met at the SACNAS (Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science) Postdoc Leadership Institute. "We have done meetings where we all present the things that we're working on to remind ourselves that the work that we're doing matters, the research that we're doing is important, and I know what you're doing, and I can support that and encourage that."

Volunteering is another effective path to networking and community building. The early-career professionals we spoke with described how, through contributing to conference activities, society committees, and working groups, they have built relationships with hardworking and skilled people in their fields and how those relationships have had positive impacts on their eventual careers.



Aryeh Drager, a member of AMS and now an assistant professor at SUNY Oswego, said, "The faculty co-chair for the AMS student conference during my last year or two on the [planning] committee was Dr. John Knox, who is a professor at the University of Georgia

Networking opportunities



Volunteer at an event, review abstract submissions, or chair a conference session.



Join a committee or working group in your department, company, or professional society.



Join a student group, club, or chapter of a professional society related to your field.



Offer to give a talk at a department or company event or as part of a seminar series.



Apply for student and early-career mentorship and training programs offered by professional societies and other organizations.



Interview scientists that you admire about how they got into the field and what opportunities they see for new scientists.

(Artwork adapted from iStock.com/Giorgi Gogitidze.)

who has won several awards for his teaching.... Later, when I was teaching, I used his introductory-level meteorology textbook in one of my classes, and I started corresponding with him a lot more with suggestions for textbook edits and typo fixes and things like that. I've kept in touch with him since then, and, ultimately, he was one of my reference-letter writers for my job applications this past year."

Fundamentally, our interviews support that networking is a form of community building that is fundamental to how scientific communities are created and sustained. The strongest professional relationships emerge through repeated collaboration, shared service, and mutual support over time. Together, those webs of relationships form the social infrastructure that enables scientific communities to flourish and science to advance. PT

References

1. J. Davis et al., "Networking via LinkedIn: An examination of usage and career benefits," *J. Vocat. Behav.* **118**, 103396 (2020).
2. H. Wolff, K. Moser, "Effects of networking on career success: A longitudinal study," *J. Appl. Psychol.* **94**, 196 (2009).
3. A. M. Porter, J. Oman, T. Owens, *Building Up the Next Generation of Scientific Society Leaders*, American Institute of Physics (2025).

Photos on pages 32–33 show networking in action. **1** William Munizzi (second from left) visits Capitol Hill and **3** (right) attends an American Physical Society meeting earlier this year. (Photos courtesy of William Munizzi.) At the 2026 American Institute of Physics Annual Forum, **2** Ari Jain (center) and **4** Trevor Jerome speak about leadership, **6** Erika Brown of APS participates in a small-group discussion, and **7** Carlos Martinez (right) and **8** Jain (right) network with other attendees. (Photos courtesy of AIP.) **5** Aryeh Drager (right) attends a symposium at Brookhaven National Laboratory in 2026. (Photo courtesy of Aryeh Drager.)

Anne Marie Porter is the assistant director for social science research and **Trevor Owens** is the chief research officer at the American Institute of Physics.

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