How (Not) to Network in Graduate School



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A While Back, I Received an Email …

Subject: Greetings!

Dear Prof. Farzan:

Par. 1: My name is […]. I found your address on Google, …

Par. 2: University of Toronto is fantastic! World-class research …

Par. 3: I am looking for a postdoc position in theory. Have submitted my file. Not heard back.

Par. 4: I am from […] University. Since you also have completed your undergraduate degree at […], I thought to ask you if you can help me.

Guess What I Did?

- No, I don’t delete e-mails!
- I archived it!
  - And used it for this talk! ☺
- Obviously, the sender needed help.
  - In general, I like to help people.
- What went wrong?

Mistake # 1: Network When You Need It

- Create your network before you need it.
  - And, not only because you might need it later.

- A strong professional network can
  - be very useful when you need help
    - … but it is much more than that
  - create opportunities
    - … that you can't even imagine now
  - be a constant source of guidance and support
    - … to help you grow and advance towards your goals
  - …

Example – Network When You Need It

- Good example of networking when needing the network
- Being in the same school doesn't count
  - Even Facebook does not consider that a network anymore! ☺
- Things might have been different if …
  - He had shared his work with me before
  - We had collaborated on a project
  - …

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Mistake # 2: See Your Side Only



- Networks are made through personal relationships
  - Long-lasting relationships are win/win
- You need to know what the other side wants/needs to create a win/win situation
  - Sometimes not straight-forward to guess
- You give and receive
  - Start by giving first
  - **Example.** Offering to help
    - Usually a very good way to approach someone
    - Most people appreciate it

Example – See Your Side Only

- I am happy to help but I don't know what he wants
  - Subject not helpful
  - Par 3 is confusing (I'm not in theory group)
  - Par 4 doesn't tell me what I can do
- Be specific and concise
  - That's what I need

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Detour: Asking for a Favor

- Sometimes asking for a favor can be a good starter
  - Sometimes people *want* to help
- Needs to be a genuine request
  - … and not very costly
    - In terms of time, effort, …
- **Example**. I've read your paper, have extended your results, and thought you might be interested
  - Or, I have a question
  - They can tell if your comment/question is genuine/smart
- Costly requests are usually rejected if you don't have a strong relationship in place
  - People are busy in general. Even if they want to help, there is a good chance they can't.

You Still Need to Know What You Want

- Seeing others' side doesn't mean you should forget yours!
- Know what you want
  - After all, you want to win too!
- Are you networking to find a good job later?
  - Collaboration? Reference letters? …
- However, be open minded and generous
  - Think long-term
  - Don't strict yourself by focusing too much on goals and short-term return

Mistake # 3: Focus on Saving Time

- People should come first
  - Relationships can't be built under time constraints
  - Forget time management! ☺



- Imagine a parent trying to bond with his/her rebellious child
  - In only 30 minutes a week!
  - Time is up! We are done! See you next week!

Networking is About People Not Time

- Genuinely seek to learn about people
  - Learn their names
  - Where they are from
  - Their research interests
  - Recent projects
  - …
- Conferences are great opportunities for this
  - Also, courses, group projects, …
- Your advisor (and fellow graduate students) can be great sources of help in building new connections

Example – Focus on Saving Time

- Mistakes happen, but this is not a good start!
- Taking the time to personalize can pay off
  - Par 2 is an attempt in this direction, but doesn't seem relevant here

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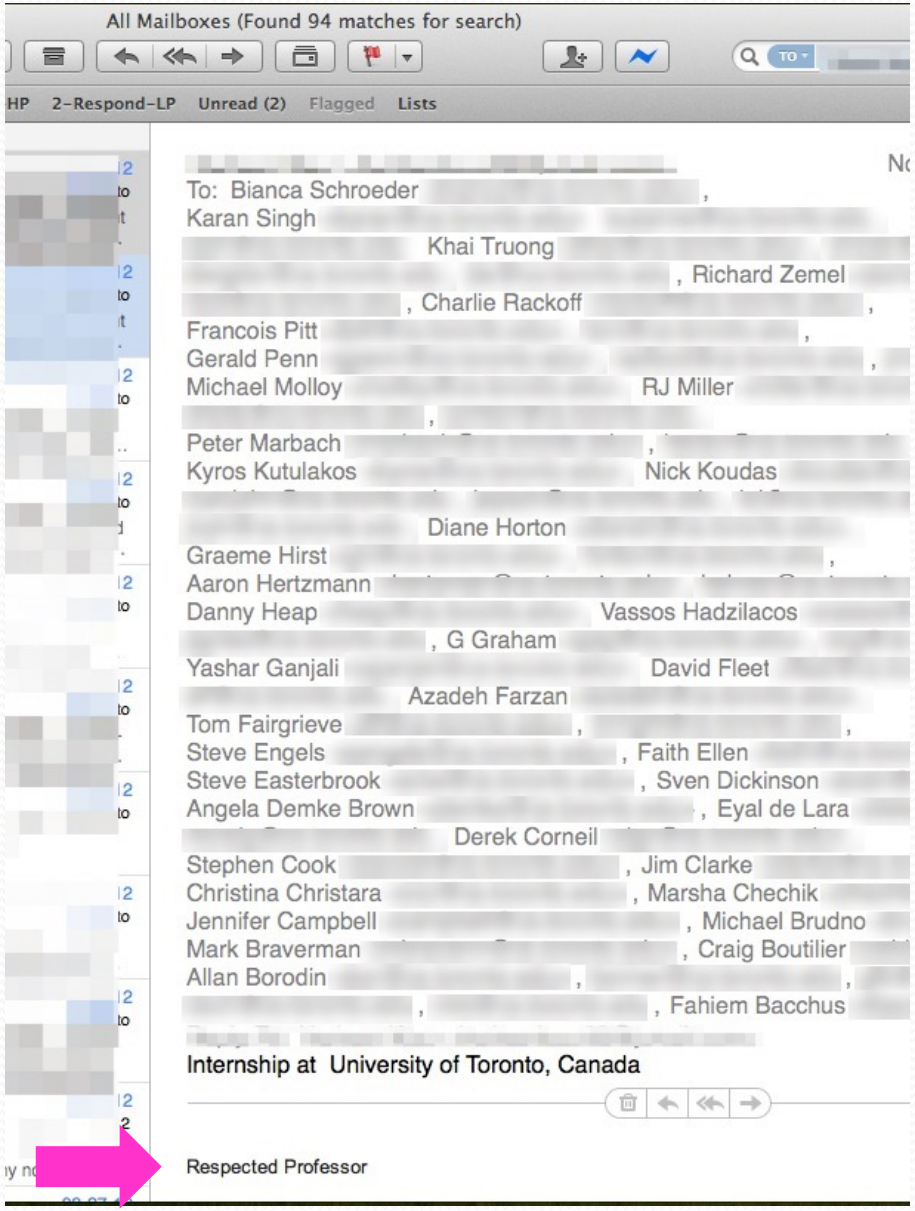
Another Example – Focus on Saving Time

- Bulk messages feel very *impersonal*
  - … and non-professional
- Your chances of any response is almost zero
  - At least the kind of response you are hoping for
  - You might get some harsh replies though! ☺



The Work of Networking

- Networking comes natural to some people
  - They are naturally good at connecting with others
- Most people need to work on their networking skills in one way or the other
  - Requires time and effort
  - In long-term it is worth it though!
- Need time/effort to grow
  - … and maintain your network
- You are on the right track! ☺
  - Sitting in this room
  - … or going through these slides



Mistake # 4: “Successful” People Only

- You might think you need to network with “successful” people only
  - Having successful people in your network is great
  - But, you should not restrict yourself to those only
- People around you might be the best source of help and support
  - Your fellow graduate students
  - … or even undergraduate students
- Aligning your goals together can be very powerful
  - 1+1 >> 2
  - You can complement each other’s strengths and weaknesses

Example – Synergy

- If you are good in theory, you might be able to create a very strong team with someone in systems …
  - Different sets of problems
  - Different skill sets
  - Sometimes amazing results come out of such collaborations
- Many examples

Mistake # 5: Focus on Having More Friends

- Good to have many friends, but not at all costs
  - If having more friends means less interaction with your existing friends, you might want to rethink
- It's not about the number of contacts you have
  - Don't be fooled with the number of friends in Facebook, ...; not a good metric!
  - It's about the strength of your relationships
- Your resources (time, energy) are limited
  - Maintaining existing relationships takes time and effort

Mistake # 6: Social Media is Evil

- Online social networks can sometimes be a time sink
  - Some people never use them
    - Might be the right choice for them
- But they can be very powerful networking tools as well
- To use them effectively you need to
  - *clearly identify your goals*, and
  - … make sure you *stick to those goals*
- Many successful professionals that use OSNs very effectively
  - To create bonds, to exchange information, …

Mistake # 7: Keep Your Network Private

- People who have great professional network are usually very generous in connecting their friends
- It is obviously some work to do this
  - … but people usually appreciate it
- Connecting your friends can make you a “social hub” in your own network
  - Very effective in strengthening your relationships, and
  - … putting you at the center of your social network

Seven Deadly (!) Networking Mistakes!



Thank you!

Thoughts/Questions?