

Meaningful Networking: A Step Towards Engaged Connections

Networking is an essential part of the business world. It's how we make connections and build relationships. We have all heard about the power of connections. But are true connections really being made, or are we simply meeting people and forgetting them afterwards? Networking is not just meeting for the sake of exchanging business cards and adding them to the collection, but rather as a way for us to build mutually-rewarding relationships that can help us develop professionally as well as personally. Networking takes practice. Very few of us know how to "work the room," leaving with meaningful interactions. Some people are gifted in the art of networking, but for the majority of us, we need a little help.

This brings me to the idea of interactive networking. Why don't we create networking events that include a theme around which we can debate and share experiences? Similar to a museum, people can feel free to talk with others or interact with the space. These museum-like exhibits could help facilitate conversation between people. Conversations are ignited around exhibits because while you might all be looking at the same thing, each person carries a different interpretation. In addition to learning that person's name and the company where they work, you are also gaining some insight into the way that person thinks. Perhaps you will find a connection on a topic not discovered through small talk. Interactive networking is a great way to meet new people while at the same time expanding your way of thinking.

Each year Villanova hosts their Annual Networking Reception. This year's theme was around "The Future of Work." For this event, we decided to incorporate this idea of interactive networking. Our goal was to engage students and professionals in a meaningful networking experience to ignite conversations that will change the future of work. The night was divided into alternating segments of networking and presentations around the four themes of flexibility, generations, collaboration, and technology. We displayed videos with people sharing their ideas for how they will change the future of work, and we placed exhibits around the room to demonstrate some ideas about what the future of work might look like. Questions were posed on the mini tables, asking people to share their thoughts with each other and via social media. Personally, I found great value in this networking experience. As I paused at each exhibit, new people would approach and share their personal stories. I met a woman by the "Workspaces Through Time" exhibit, for example, and this exhibit showing the evolution of work through time sparked our conversation. She reminisced on her experience conducting research prior to all the online databases and journals we have today. We then talked about how gathering information might change in the future. This event pushed beyond the typical networking event by encouraging people to connect by interacting with the space around them.

I believe we need to be more mindful of how we are making connections. Meeting a new person is not enough. We have to share more than our quick elevator speech to form a true connection. Meaningful networking means walking away thinking, "Wow, I can't wait to talk with that person again."