The Importance of Networking

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ABSTRACT

Do you ever find yourself hesitant to attend a networking event because you aren’t sure it is worth your time? What is your strategy or plan when you decide to attend a networking event? What is your elevator pitch? And, have you practiced it? Does your elevator pitch describe who you are and how you are unique? Do you ever think that you are not using LinkedIn™ enough to build your on-line network? Networking is an invaluable resource, offering an abundance of possibilities when paired with a well-crafted elevator pitch and a thoughtful strategy for connecting with others. In this article, written by the Council on Women in Energy and Environmental Leadership (CWEEL) Career Development Chair, Kiersten Washle, and CWEEL Co-Chair, Deborah Lenny, we will provide answers to these key questions and provide “tips and tricks” on networking, whether in-person or virtually.

THE IMPORTANCE AND PURPOSE OF NETWORKING

As engineers, we often prioritize sharpening our technical skills, expanding expertise, acquiring certifications, and advancing our education. It’s crucial to ask ourselves if we are allocating the same level of focus and time to cultivating our social and communication skills. Even though these play an equally vital role in shaping our careers, many of us overlook the significance of dedicating time to enhancing our interpersonal skills, like networking. In this article, we will provide tips and tricks on networking, whether in-person (such as AEE World) or through social media tools such as LinkedIn™.

Networking involves connecting with your industry peers including colleagues, mentors, industry leaders, and potential business partners. Although it is classified as a soft skill, networking has a demonstrably
positive effect for job seekers. For instance, “According to HubSpot, 85% of jobs are filled through networking. In fact, according to CNBC, 70% of jobs are never published publicly. These jobs are either posted internally or are created specifically for candidates that recruiters meet through networking. According to LinkedIn™, 70% of professionals hired in 2016 had a connection at their company, and 80% of professionals consider networking vital to their career success.”* As the statistics show, networking often leads to career advancement opportunities, and it allows us to share and exchange ideas and knowledge.

Networking requires practice and time to build the courage, confidence, communications skills, and a real interest in connecting with others. Connections with others can help us grow both professionally and personally. Maya Angelou said, “While networking opens doors, genuine connections build bridges. In the dance of relationships, authenticity is the music that makes the journey memorable. Remember, it’s not just about who you know, but how deeply you connect with those who share the rhythm of your aspirations.”†

THE ELEVATOR PITCH—
HOW TO DEVELOP AND CRAFT THIS FLEXIBLE TOOL

What is an Elevator Pitch?
An elevator pitch is essentially what you want people to remember about you after a meeting or even a brief introduction. It’s about highlighting something distinctive or unique about yourself. When crafting an elevator pitch, reversing your perspective sometimes helps. You can do this by asking: What do I remember about the person I just met? What stood out to me after meeting this person? Typically, it’s something unique about them or an interesting conversation that becomes a memorable connection. This principle holds true in the realm of networking as well.

When to Use an Elevator Pitch?

The first step in crafting an effective elevator pitch is to write the elevator pitch down. Draft a few versions and read them out loud to yourself or practice them in a mirror. This technique will help you refine your message. Crafting a written elevator pitch comes with the advantage that once it’s written, you can use it in various professional settings. Whether you’re introducing yourself during a workplace Zoom meeting, taking part in a job interview, using it on your “About” section of LinkedIn™, or attending a networking event. Having a well-defined pitch allows for flexibility once written. The best scenario is that you write a few comprehensive pitches and then tailor and utilize segments of the pitch as needed in different situations.

How to Develop Your Elevator Pitch

When you think about crafting your elevator pitch, think about the following questions in terms of BOTH the professional and personal aspects of your life. These are some of the questions that will help you develop your elevator pitch:

1. What defines you on both a personal and professional level?
2. What are your strengths and skills?
3. What are some of your accomplishments?
4. What sets you apart, makes you unique, or differentiates you from others?
5. How do you add value?

Sample Elevator Pitch

Figures 1 and 2 show Deborah Lenny’s and Kiersten Washle’s written elevator pitch as it appears in the “About” section of their LinkedIn™ profiles. We are providing these figures as an example of our elevator pitches but also because they show that no two people will have the same content or even structure. Remember, this is about showcasing your unique brand! Once you’ve crafted your comprehensive elevator pitch, you can leverage its various components in any networking scenario, whether face-to-face or online. It’s really that simple!
MAXIMIZING YOUR LINKEDIN™ PRESENCE

Any tool is only as useful as its application. When you want to build a deck, a hammer is great! When you want to build a career? Maybe not so much. LinkedIn™, though, can be an incredible tool when deployed to network and build a career. The first step is having a profile on the site, although that alone is not enough. When building and developing your profile on LinkedIn™, keep the following best practices in mind.

Profile Completeness

The LinkedIn™ platform has many features. From an individual user perspective, your home base is your personal profile. Therefore, you want to complete your profile as thoroughly possible. Though many users think of their profile as only a showcase of their job history, in actuality there are numerous profile sections you can choose to include. The more information on your profile, the more anyone interested can...
virtually get to know you. This helps prospective clients, recruiters, and even coworkers better understand your skill set, experience, education, and personal interests.

**Connections**

The network functionality of LinkedIn™ is making connections with other professionals. Connecting with someone means you can message them; their posts will show up in your newsfeed and vice versa.

When sending a connection request, the website will ask you if you would like to personalize it with a note. While it is not mandatory, we advise you NEVER just send a blank connection request. Everything is improved by additional context or familiarity. Thus, you should always personalize the request with a brief note. This will not take very long as, when I say brief, I mean it—there is actually a character limit!

If this is someone you have never met, include context for why you are reaching out, e.g., “Hello NAME, I saw you are working for FIRM, I am interested in applying there and wonder if we could connect and potentially discuss the employee experience.” or “Hello NAME, I saw you are speaking at EVENT and your presentation looks really interesting. I would like to connect here and see more about your current and future work.” If this is someone you have met before, you should still personalize the note. If it is a recent connection, one of my favorites things to do is include when and where we met! This has always helped me because, in the future, I can always go back to our initial chat messages and refresh myself on how I know this person. For example, “Good afternoon NAME, it was so great meeting you at the YEAR—CONFERENCE! Our conversation about X was so great. I would like to connect here to stay in touch.”

Separate from connections, you can also “follow” profiles on LinkedIn™. This is useful for folks that are thought leaders whose posts you may want to see in your newsfeed but do not necessarily feel you can connect with them—think people like former Vice President Al Gore or, US Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm.

**Creating Posts**

Creating posts is a great way to share updates with your network, publicize your projects, or even let people know you are hiring. When you make a post, it will show up in the newsfeed of your connections. If
those connections interact with the post via comments, reactions, or even reposting, then their connections will see the interaction and your post on their newsfeeds as well.

If you are posting, it is safe to assume you want people to know about it! Therefore, you want to increase the overall exposure of your post. To do this, there are a few key tricks.

1. Tag relevant people and organizations. This increases the places your post will appear and encourages others involved to interact. For example—passed your CEM exam? When you post that credential, tag the Association of Energy Engineers! When I did this, the AEE account commented their congratulations. You can do this by first typing an “@” before the name of the individual or company page. For example, in Figure 3, I was able to tag AEE by typing “@Association of Energy Engineers” which will open a drop-down menu of accounts. You select the account you wish to tag and it will show up as a link within your post.

2. You can use hashtags (#) to tag key topics or subjects. This makes the post searchable to anyone looking for those key terms. Format-wise, using these organically in the body of text is more ideal than writing a post and then dumping a bunch of hashtags at the bottom. For example, see Figures 3 and 4, where one includes hashtags in the body of the text and the other just throws a bunch at the bottom.

3. Use web links to direct people. If you are talking about an upcoming webinar or a particularly insightful article, link it! If you paste a URL into the post, LinkedIn™ will automatically generate a clickable preview of the page that shows below your text. Once this preview is shown, you can remove the URL from the text box to keep the text neat and concise.

Remember, your LinkedIn™ presence essentially represents your personal brand so, use all these tools to share who you are and what your professional interests are!
While recent history led to many live events going virtual, in-person events are always going to be around. The following sections go over some strategies to make the most of in-person events.

**Network with A Buddy**

If networking feels too intimidating—go with a networking wingman (or wingwoman). It can be intimidating to enter a room full of strangers, so naturally, showing up to an event with someone you already know can...
increase your comfort level and bolster confidence. It is important not to get caught up only talking to your buddy though. Ideally the two of you can approach other pairs or groups chatting to join the conversation. If you see a loner, invite them to chat! Having two folks can really help make sure there is a flow of conversation.

**Come Prepared**

Most people get nervous about attending an event alone or having awkward conversations. To avoid this, we recommend several tips:

1. Have a list of pre-prepared questions to keep in your back pocket. Everyone has experienced that moment where the spotlight hits and... you freeze. This tip is your antidote! Imagine you go to an event, and you introduce yourself. The other person reciprocates and then the ever-dreaded awkward silence hits. You can’t think of anything to say... never fear! Your backup questions are here! These default questions are meant to be 2 to 4 questions you can roll out whenever you need. Ideally there are a couple light ones and a couple professional ones. The goal is just to have them be as open ended as possible. You are trying to get people talking. Some of our favorites include:
   - Do you have any travel plans coming up? Where are you going?
   - How did you get into this field?
   - What is your favorite part or your role?
   - How did you hear about this event?
   - From where are you traveling from?
   - Are you involved in other professional organizations? (If yes, which ones?)

2. Another way to have a conversation starter ready is to wear a conversation piece! I love wearing bright colors, items with a story, or something on the theme of the event. I have found these are often an easy way for others to approach me and start a conversation — visualize yourself at an event where you want to strike up a conversation with someone but aren’t sure how. Then you notice they have a unique
jacket, suddenly it is very easy to walk up and tell them their jacket is really neat; you can converse from there.

The point is, I am creating those opportunities for others with my conversation pieces. If someone does walk up and comment on such a piece, I have the piece’s story locked and loaded to respond. The first back and forth of the conversation is then complete.

For example, I thrifted a shirt with buildings all over it a while ago. My title was Building Science Engineer, which meant I could easily make a joke about the shirt being apt for my job title and maybe even share that I acquired it secondhand because sustainability is an integral part of my personal and professional mission.

3. Go to events with a goal in mind. The thought here is to utilize gamification and shift your mind away from pre-networking nerves. This is one of my favorite tips to use for myself. By creating a mission for myself, I feel more focused on achieving my goal and winning the game I am playing with myself instead of focusing on my inhibitions about speaking with strangers. Common missions I have given myself include talking to 3 people I don’t know, finding someone with more than 10 years’ experience, or learning about 2 companies I hadn’t heard of. These are between you and yourself, so it is completely customizable based on what you really want to get out of the event.

Follow Up

Connecting with folks at an event is great, but even better is growing that connection. To do that, there needs to be a continuation of the relationship. This could occur through meeting again at future events, exchanging emails, or connecting on LinkedIn™. Therefore, a vital part of in person connections is having a plan to follow up and then ACTUALLY following up. This is as simple as having a system in place for collecting contact information to follow. Personally, I use the method described in the connections section above, where I send personalized LinkedIn™ connection requests.
Get Involved

One of the best ways to get to know folks and make connections? Organically! When you get involved with an organization or group pertaining to an interest you have, you don’t have to find something to talk about. Below are a few of our favorite ways to get involved:

1. Join a Committee—Most professional organizations are composed of a few staff and many volunteers. They work together to achieve great things! Committees are a way to organize everyone to do the work. If you care about a specific topic or cause, there is likely a committee around it. Seeking out these committees automatically connects you to folks that you have at least one thing in common with!

2. Volunteer at an Event—this is an excellent opportunity on many levels. First, by helping organize, you have influence on topics covered, speakers, and the event structure. Second, volunteers often receive a reduced registration rate or even, free entry. Lastly, as a volunteer, you might be wearing a shirt or name tag marking you as a volunteer. What better way to speak to folks than to be the person they come to with questions?

3. Be a Speaker—Speaking is an excellent opportunity to showcase your knowledge. Being on a panel or giving a webinar introduces you to all the people that attend! Afterwards, people will know more about you and your expertise, which will allow those with similar interests to find you and connect. Last time we presented at AEE World in Orlando, there was a clear spike in connection requests over the following weeks.

4. Mentoring—There will always be someone with more experience than you. There will also always be someone with less experience than you. Networking via mentoring or being mentored is an amazing way to connect with others, give back, and have a mutually beneficial experience. Building meaningful networks is a critical outcome of a successful mentor-mentee relationship. Both the mentor and mentee have their own network—leveraging both of their networks to grow, connect and develop professionally is a natural outcome of this type of relationship.
CONCLUSION WITH ACTION ITEMS

Networking requires practice and time to build the courage, confidence, communications skills, and a real interest in connecting with others. It’s about the connections with others that help us grow both professionally and personally. Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist and philosopher, once said “The only way to have a friend is to be one.”

We encourage you to get out there, make friends, and build your network. Join us and become a member of the Council on Women in Energy and Environmental Leadership (CWEEL)! We have many opportunities for speaking engagements, volunteering and joining one of our 11 committees.

MORE on CWEEL

The Council on Women in Energy and Environmental Leadership (CWEEL) is a division of the Association of Energy Engineers (AEE). CWEEL’s mission is to support career development for professional women, mentoring, networking, and scholarships for aspiring women to pursue technical education and careers in the energy and environmental fields. Since 2007, CWEEL has been committed to advancing gender equality in a historically male-dominated industry. Our members gain valuable access to a network of professional peers and mentors, career advancement opportunities, and leading-edge technical training. CWEEL strives to increase the diverse membership of AEE by involving women in all levels of participation and leadership in AEE.

Please join us by becoming a member of CWEEL. As an AEE member, you may add CWEEL, a division of AEE, to your membership. There is no additional fee to join CWEEL.

1. Log on to the AEE membership portal at https://portal.aeecenter.org/.
2. Once you log in, your Home AEE Member Portal screen, shown in Figure 5, will show a list of optional links. Select (i.e., click on) “Upgrade Your Membership/Add-Ons (Divisions),” (circled in red in Figure 5).
3. Select CWEEL as a division you would like to add to your membership.
We also invite you to form a CWEEL group within your local AEE Chapter or join one of our Governing Council Committees. For more information on CWEEL and how to get more involved, visit our website at www.cweel.org.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

**Kiersten Washle, LFA, CEM, LEED Green Associate**, is based in Virginia and works within the Sustainable Operations team at JLL, where she develops sustainable solutions for clients. In all things, Kiersten’s goal is to bring the built environment into greater harmony with our natural one. Prior to JLL, Kiersten worked with the CMTA where she conducted analysis to understand the effects of building design decisions on key performance indicators (KPIs), such as energy use intensity and carbon footprint. Her work contributed to the construction of 5 net zero energy buildings in New England, including the first net zero school in the state of Connecticut. She has completed multiple sustainability and decarbonization master plans for universities and towns totaling more than 2.5 million square feet.
Kiersten holds a BS in systems engineering and sustainability, as well as an MS in engineering management, both from George Washington University. Additionally, she has an MBA from the Quantic School of Business. She holds a certified energy manager (CEM) accreditation, Living Futures Accreditation, is a LEED Green Associate, and an Active-Score AP.

Kiersten Washle may be contacted on LinkedIn™ at https://www.linkedin.com/in/kiersten-washle/ or use the following QR code.

Deborah Lenny is currently director of program management and consulting services with Utility Advantage, LLC. Armed with an engineering degree from Rutgers and an MBA from LaSalle University, Deb excelled in key leadership roles with esteemed companies such as PSE&G, Hess Corporation, Direct Energy, and NRG Business. She remains committed to providing exceptional leadership and ensuring outstanding customer and client consulting services in the energy and environmental industry.

Passionate about empowering and advocating for women in engineering and energy, Deb volunteers with local science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs and has held various chair positions on the Governing Council of CWEEL. Currently co-chair of the CWEEL Governing Council, Deb has successfully amplified the voices of women in energy and facilitated meaningful initiatives, including scholarships, mentoring programs, fundraising, and career development seminars. In addition to her professional and volunteer endeavors, Deb finds joy in traveling with her family and engaging in triathlon training and competitions. Deborah Lenny may be contacted on LinkedIn™ at https://www.linkedin.com/in/deborah-lenny/ or use the following QR code.