

Networking: why your

A YOUNG REGIONAL LAWYER FINDING HER FEET IN THE PROFESSION HAS FOUND THAT SOMETIMES NETWORKING IS JUST ABOUT TURNING UP.

At high school and university, law students hear the same mantra spouted by careers advisers: networking. It is a subtle art, and something that many of us shy away from, but my experience shows networking really does lead to great opportunities and experiences.

Building a base

As many young lawyers and law students know, going for your first job in the legal profession can be daunting. But for me, it wasn't as difficult as I expected.

In the final year of my degree, I was studying off-campus in my hometown, Horsham. A local solicitor offered me a job that was critical to my development; I gained my first mentor while satisfying the practical component of my degree. At the time, I didn't stop to reflect on how the opportunity had come about, but it is clear to me now that prior volunteer work experience at the same firm had probably paved the way.

At around the same time, I heard about a local dinner through the LIV's Regional and Suburban Young Lawyers (RSYL) committee. Despite not knowing anyone, I bit the bullet and went to the dinner solo. There I met an up-and-coming young lawyer with some really interesting stories about her work with Victoria Legal Aid (VLA).

Also at the dinner table were a veteran local magistrate and other local practitioners. I'm sure I didn't impress anyone as an undiscovered but wildly talented almost-lawyer: I couldn't follow most of the conversation. It just felt like a pleasant evening out. But that was an important lesson – sometimes networking is just about turning up.

When I decided to move away from Horsham for my traineeship year, my employer/mentor graciously referred me to a firm he knew in Hamilton. I progressed to interview on a warm referral, got a good reception and voilà, a traineeship. That was when I started to see something in this networking caper.

Mastering the meet-and-greet

The early years as a student, trainee and junior lawyer are ripe with networking opportunities. Often these are traditional "meet and greet" networking functions, but not always. As a trainee, I learned from several different lawyers and was encouraged to visit Warrnambool and Melbourne County Courts to see counsel and the bench in action. Who knows when those I met will drift back into my sphere?

I had also been a member of Victorian Women Lawyers (VWL) for a while, without ever having engaged with the organisation. Finally, I responded to an email calling for people to put their names forward to be sent to a national women's law conference in Queensland. Imagine my delight when this little unknown – a bush trainee, no less! – was selected.

Not long after that, Deakin University hosted a rural law conference at Warrnambool. The theme was relevant to my career goals, and by that stage I knew a good networking opportunity when I saw it. I went along and heard High Court Chief Justice Robert French open the conference. I pondered the role networking might have played in his ascent as I left with a business card in hand and an accompanying job offer. To be clear: I did nothing impressive there, other than take an empty space at the lunch table and show polite interest in anyone who

made eye contact with me. Ultimately, I took another job post-admission, but I could do so feeling confident about my options.

Taking stock

So concluded a full and prosperous traineeship year. For me, the time came to acknowledge that home is where the heart is. I handed in my notice and returned to Horsham to ruminate on my next move. I wanted to make a good decision. By this time, I understood that this would involve consciously using my network.

Almost immediately, a friend at the Coroner's Court rang to say that there was a short-term data project happening. It was a perfect opportunity to fill a gap, so I applied and spent almost a month learning about a unique and fascinating jurisdiction.

I began organising my admission. Sucking up the nerves, I phoned one of the inspiring women barristers I had met at that Queensland conference months before. Kim Knights did not hesitate in agreeing to move my admission for me. Post-admission, she showed my family and me the warmth, generosity and collegiality of the legal profession.

Meantime, my VLA contact back in Horsham, whom I had met at the dinner two years earlier, had transferred to Melbourne and left a position vacant. I realised that I knew both the incumbent and also one of my eventual interviewers, who had been at one of the other RSYL dinners I had attended.

I got the job. This was the move that anchored me in my hometown, changed my career trajectory and gave me a large network of VLA lawyers and legal professionals to learn from. I was also introduced to the thrill of in-court advocacy.

careers teacher was right



ISTOCKPHOTO

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Maintaining networks

It would have been easy, after securing the position at VLA, to throw myself into my new job and ignore the networks I had developed, but another key part of networking is maintaining the relationships that you have made. I have kept up my involvement with the RSYL committee, and now serve as its Wimmera representative. This earns me a spot on the local law association.

I also regularly attend drinks nights for visiting County and Supreme Court circuits. There I have met members of the bar and bench in a more intimate and friendly setting than the norm.

I am still a member of VWL too, and I keep an eye on the National Rural Law and Justice Alliance, which emerged from that conference at Warrnambool.

Singing your song

My life in the law has only spanned a short period, but I take every chance to tell my story. To date, two instalments of my story have appeared in VWL’s *Portia* magazine. More recently, I gave a brief interview to the ABC’s Law Report about being a woman lawyer in the bush – another opportunity I credit to VWL. I have been in local media from time to time through my work at VLA and as a RSYL committee member.

To get these opportunities, though, you have to put yourself out there.

Lessons learned

For many young lawyers, networking can seem like a tedious and embarrassing task – something that you’re either good at or not. But in a few short years, I have learned that networking comes in many different forms. It is essentially about being engaged with your career and your community and grabbing the opportunities that come your way.

Some of the contacts I have made in my time have been one-off. It is hard to predict when they might bear fruit.

Taking risks and greeting opportunities with courage is worthwhile, and only occasionally terrifying.

I encourage other budding lawyers to go ahead and deliver that resume to your mum’s solicitor, or voice your goals when you meet some interesting person, or respond to that generic email, or just breathe deep and walk into that room full of strangers.

The moral of the story is that your careers teacher was right: network, network, network . . . and never stop networking. ●

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