



Speed dating chemists in NSW

A key metric for the services provided to our members is the quality of RACI events – how well targeted they are to the audience, and how they are carried off. In July, the Young Chemists and Analytical Chemistry Groups in New South Wales collaborated to put together a ‘speed dating’ networking event that excelled in both respects.

Hosted at 3M in Sydney, and sponsored by Evolve Scientific Recruitment, the event was a planned effort to reach out to young chemists, to find ways of creating specific value suited to their particular needs. It included a guided tour of 3M’s Innovation Centre at North Ryde, followed by a talk from Tania Notaras FRACI CChem (pictured networking with some young chemists) on her experience of building up Australia’s largest private laboratory company, refreshments, and then small-group discussions with experienced RACI members.

In short, it was an excellent function. George Zavras and Danny Wong did a great job of organisation, including having

all of the attendees already pre-grouped by coloured name tags so that breaking up and coming together happened smoothly. The event was fully subscribed, and the conversations were active and engaged.

The most particularly striking responses from a survey of participants were in the areas of greatest interest to young chemists. When asked what type of event they would be most likely to attend in future, just short of 100% of respondents identified networking events, and over 75% expressed interest in mentoring events.

This exactly mirrors my own experience with young chemists. In my presentation to young members about making the transition into the workforce, I emphasise the critical importance that networks play in any career – not just in finding employment, but also in creating value throughout your career. Through networks, you can identify new business opportunities, find ways to collaborate, and sometimes even

make joint discoveries. Networking is very much a case of '1 + 1 = 3 ... for extremely large values of 1'.

However, as our longer-serving members will remember, it can be extremely daunting as a young chemist to attend an RACI event. The room is filled with people actively engaged in conversations among members who already know each other well, who are older, and more established and distinguished in their careers. Even I, a comparatively gregarious fellow (small 'f') found this incredibly intimidating at the beginning of my career.

It is therefore incumbent on established members not just to welcome these newer participants, but to actively engage them in our conversations and make sure that they are also getting the full value of their participation. Our organisation cannot thrive without the active engagement, participation and ultimately retention of our young members.

As noted, mentoring was the other major area for which young chemists expressed interest. Marguerite Evans-Galea and Charles Galea write in this issue (p. 26) about the theory and practice of mentoring. I have run my own ad-hoc mentoring program for the past few years, and found the process to be eminently rewarding.

As an industrial chemist, my mentoring program is focused on commercial careers. I try to start with chemists around third year, and then support them through to their first career role. I offer guidance on practical issues – developing skills and experiences useful to their resumé; guidance on how to select an honours project; proofreading honours theses; interview skills and improved job applications; as well as hosting my mentees to networking events and facilitating their introduction to networks.

I believe that this is one of the most tangible forms of support that I can offer the next generation of chemists. And given the strong expression of interest in mentoring at the Speed Dating event, I am keen to gauge the interest among my RACI colleagues for a wider and more formal mentoring program. I welcome anyone who might be interested (either as a mentor or mentee) to contact me.

Speed dating Q&A

How does a PhD affect my employment prospects? This is a regional issue. Unlike in the US, in Australia it is not common for chemists to move smoothly between industry and academia. While a PhD can significantly enhance an academic career, there is a risk in Australia that it will be perceived as having three negatives: competing candidates of the same age without PhDs have three years more industrial experience; candidates with PhDs will expect higher pay, faster advancement and higher status; and candidates with PhDs will expect to be able to publish their ongoing research, which is not necessarily what companies want. Of course, none of these needs be true. The best advice for any job candidate is to be aware of the potential negative assumptions about your status, and to take concrete steps to address these. Make sure that you include industrial applications and linkages in your PhD work. Emphasise the commercial outcomes of your work. Be clear and realistic about your expectations. And, most importantly, use your networks to identify the opportunities where your training will be most marketable.

What are employers looking for? In general terms, bachelor degrees produce a fairly generic set of candidates – more or less the same basic skills and (limited) experience. At the graduate level, employers most commonly look to personality, 'fit' with their organisation, and examples of demonstrated behaviours that will be useful to them. When I want to hire a researcher, my favoured candidates are ones who demonstrate the behaviour by researching my company and my chemistry before they apply.

What qualifications make me more employable? Statistically, double degrees enhance employability. The greatest value in modern commerce comes from bridging between specialised skill sets. Even if you are not studying a full double degree, consider taking a few business-oriented subjects (accounting, economics and/or finance) as part of your studies so that you are at least passingly familiar with the concepts and terminology. After this, the extracurricular activities you undertake are also important. What skills and behaviours do they demonstrate?

What if I am an international student? Unfortunately, most employers cannot afford to sponsor workers to come to Australia, and that includes students. At the graduate level, there are too many candidates who already hold work rights, and the skill sets required are too generic, for a company to be able to prove (as they must) that a foreign worker is required. As an international student, you must get on the 'front foot' to organise your visa if you want to work in Australia at the completion of your studies. Having done so, you stand every bit as good a chance as an Australian-born graduate – sometimes even more so. In some cases, there can be an assumption that someone born overseas will work harder to 'make it' in Australia, and will be more loyal to their employer. Also, language skills are critical. Skills can be taught, but the ability to communicate with your team is one of the major factors in your ability to create value for your employer.

I offer my fulsome congratulations to the NSW Young Chemists Group for their energy and enthusiasm, and to the NSW Analytical Chemists for their work in supporting this collaboration. Working together, we have every opportunity before us to grow and fortify our society for the long term.

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