Luck is no accident

The power of connecting to people across disciplines

‘Did you ever wish that one day your telephone would ring and someone would be calling to offer you the perfect job? Wishing makes for interesting daydreams. No harm comes from wishing – unless wishing is all you do.’

Excerpt from Luck is no Accident by John D. Krumboltz, Ph.D., & Al S. Levin, Ed.D.

When talking to accomplished professionals, I discovered, peculiarly enough maybe, that a common denominator in the events that boosted their careers is that they ‘happened by chance’. Unplanned events or chance occurrences like being in the wrong meeting room, a spontaneous vacation trip, tagging along to a networking drink with a friend, a missed train, chatting while waiting in line, a volunteering gig, trying out an activity you never tried before... often lead to unexpected life directions and career choices. Of course, given that your mind is open enough to notice the opportunities that life presents to you and that you are willing to take them with your both hands. As the authors of the book Luck is no accident repeatedly emphasize: ‘Good luck tends to ‘happen’ to people who are engaged in constructive activities. Good luck seldom happens to those who wait passively by the phone.’

Engaging in activities where you can meet new people is always a win. Sharing your passions/ your research with others, also – and maybe especially – with people outside of your field will almost always lead to new and surprising insights, and, who knows, opportunities to collaborate, access to those people’s networks and maybe even an entry to a career path that was unknown to you before.

Testimonial Kris Pauwels, Research & Grant Officer for Life Sciences & Medicine @ VUB

During my doctoral studies I proactively built my network by joining associations relevant to my field of study. On a VIB (Flemish Institute for Biotechnology) seminar, I started a conversation with a talented international PhD-candidate who had just joined a new research group at VUB. Over conversations about our passion for research and his impressions of the Belgian culture, we became good friends.

He casually told his supervisors about the scientific discussions we had had about his research topic, and before I knew it, they offered me a Postdoc position. As I wanted to gain international experience, however, they gave me some suggestions about international research options related to their research topics. To obtain the Postdoc position in London I was particularly interested in, I had to apply for an EMBO fellowship. When I mentioned the names of my friend’s supervisors during the interview, I realized how small the world actually is and how important ‘who you know’ is instead of just ‘what you know’.

Addressing a more introvert researcher at a networking event, helped me gain a good friend and as an additional bonus a Postdoc position in London for 2 years that allowed me to build an international network.
In addition to the importance and undeniable impact of ‘proactively managed happenstance’, engaging with professionals across disciplines is not only personally rewarding and enriching, but also a necessity of our time. While the problems of our society are gaining in complexity, the boundaries between disciplines are fading more and more in order to offer a substantial answer to those challenges.

A beautiful example of unity in diversity: VUB professionals united by their questioning mindset and research skills doing pioneering research embedded in and drawing from multiple disciplines:

Prof. dr. ir. Wim De Malsche, active in the field of chemical engineering, designs and develops microfluidic devices. When Wim heard my puzzled silence on the other end of the phone, he further explained: 'When you go to the doctor to have your bloodwork done, before the specialists can analyze your blood, they first have to separate all the components of your blood. The work being done at our research group will allow speeding up this (chromatography) process tremendously in the future.'

These microfluidic devices can produce very uniform particles or droplets as well as control flows at a microscale level. While haphazardly discussing their work at the coffee machine Prof. dr. Dominique Maes and Wim came to the conclusion they could contribute to each other’s research significantly. Dominique’s expertise lays in the field of protein crystallization (Bio-engineering). Studying the behavior of these crystals is very hard because of natural flowsstreams present in our surroundings. So hard, as a matter of fact, that these protein crystals are often studied in space to avoid the effects of these flows. Wim’s techniques allow to control the speed of these flows, and as such creating an effective alternative for space travel.

Wim found another application of these microfluidic devices by proactively engaging with experts in the medical sciences. Prof. dr. Karine Hellemans focuses on cell therapy in the field of diabetics. The former mentioned ability to create uniform particles (in size and shape) benefits controlled drug release considerably, and allows for the drugs/medicine in the particles to be released at a constant rate.

So... what are you waiting for, start looking for activities that allow you to engage with other interesting professionals. An excellent occasion to do just that is the PhD-day taking place on October 9th. This celebration will offer you the opportunity to meet dynamic researchers from all VUB research disciplines. Don’t see it only as a fun short-term time investment, see it for the opportunities it may bring you in the long run. You could be planting a seed for a future interaction that will boost your career in unknown ways. Go and start creating your own luck!