

# A SPEED NETWORKING EVENT: ALLOWING BUSINESS STUDENTS TO APPLY CLASSROOM-TAUGHT PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING SKILLS IN A FAST-PACED SETTING

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses how one business school developed speed networking events in order to prepare students for introduction into the workplace while serving as a demonstration of how they engage their students with the business community. The benefits of hosting a Speed Networking event are numerous. Stakeholders who gain from these events include students, potential employers, alumni and those who wish to demonstrate business school impact and engagement. In addition to providing guidance in planning and executing the event, the paper provides details regarding how to recruit students, recruit professionals and best promote, create, and execute an experiential learning Speed Networking event.*

## BACKGROUND

The Scott College of Business is an AACSB International-accredited College of Business that houses one of the largest academic programs at Indiana State University. With a focus on experiential learning, the College fully supports the institutional emphasis on preparing students for their future professional careers. The University has embraced faculty efforts to encourage students to participate in experiential courses and imbedded projects that prepare them to be the leaders and decision makers once they enter into the work force (Hodge, Proudford, & Holt, 2014). Resources have been dedicated to development of experiential projects designed to help students assess potential career paths and learn specific skills they will need when they start their career (Sprague and Percy, 2014). The College has also benefited from strong relationships with its professional alumni base and area employers who value such projects (Sprague and Hu, 2015). This is critical in providing opportunities for student engagement with external stakeholders.

## INTRODUCTION

With the rising cost of higher education, it is critical that students and parents feel that they are getting value from their education and are employable after graduation. Today's

business schools are under intense pressure to better prepare students for entry into the workplace and students and parents have come to expect a certain level of career readiness to be a critical component of the educational process. While much career readiness development can take place in the classroom, experiential learning has become an increasingly critical component to the learning process of higher education (Green & Williams, 2016). Bringing business professionals to students in a speed networking setting is one way to take professional engagement and networking to the next level. Speed networking might be described as a networking event on "steroids."

Another issue affecting many business schools, particularly those accredited by AACSB International, is the expectation that they document the engagement of their faculty and students with the external business community while demonstrating the overall impact of their educational programs. Networking events that actively connect students with professionals from the business community are prime examples of how "engaged" business schools improve the overall educational experience for their students. And tracking subsequent employment and internship opportunities offer evidence of the impact of these career-focused programs.

The Speed Networking Event detailed in this paper is important in addressing these and other issues. The event allows business students an opportunity to utilize their networking skills with local business professionals, as well as continue to learn and develop professional networking skills in an experiential learning environment. The speed component of the event modernizes the event, making it very popular with students and professionals alike. Schools that are accredited by AACSB International may use these events to demonstrate engagement on the part of students and faculty, while serving as an impetus for subsequent tracking of impact on employment and internship rates. Students make contacts with professionals from a variety of industries and broaden their professional network, while the host department or college also benefits as it showcases its promising business students to a professional audience and fosters relationships with business leaders within the community.

## CHOOSING THE STUDENTS

When identifying students to participate in this type of speed networking event, there are several possible approaches with varying levels of control over who is involved. The recommended method, ensuring the best turn out, involves an invitation only approach. Three weeks prior to the event, business faculty are asked to nominate students that meet several criteria. Faculty are asked for nominations three weeks prior to the event as that allows one week for the faculty to identify and nominate the students, one week to send the invitation and receive confirmation from the students, and one week for student preparation.

When identifying the characteristics of students to participate in this type of networking event, the main objective must be considered. This college of business currently offers several programs that provide its student members with numerous professional networking opportunities and therefore this event was designed to provide that type of experience to students not currently involved with such programs. Also, by their junior and senior years, most students are heavily involved with interviewing and networking and their skills should already be developed and actively applied in their pursuit of internships and jobs. For these reasons, the main objective is to provide experiential learning and application of networking skills for freshmen and sophomore business majors and minors that are not currently involved in any other programs that offer professional networking outside of the classroom.

## CREATING INTEREST IN STUDENTS AND FACULTY

A key component to the success of this event is interest and support from both faculty and students. Since this is a nomination driven event, it is critical for faculty to believe in and support the success of the event encourage attendance by their nominated students. To assist with getting faculty fully on board supporting the speed networking event, they are each sent a personalized email detailing the purpose of this event in terms of student success, as well as how it will assist with the documentation of engagement of their faculty and students with the external business community. Faculty need to be aware of the benefits of this event, across multiple dimensions, and how the success of this event will benefit the college as a whole. The email also outlines the timeline for the event and the criteria of nominees as follows:

- Freshman or sophomore standing
- Business major or minor
- Not currently involved with any other programs in the college that offer this type of opportunity outside of the classroom
- Showing commitment to their major, but needing to refine their professional skills

A follow-up email from the office of the Dean is also effective at relaying the importance of this event and encouraging faculty support. By communicating about the event on the administration, faculty, and student levels, a cohesive group is formed, all with the same goal of making the event a success.

Along with faculty support, creating student interest is vital to the success of this event. Student interest is often established

through three key components. First, faculty need to communicate the benefits of this event in terms of their professional development and future success. Taking a few minutes in class or through email to their nominated students is often enough to start the fire of interest in students. That fire continues to grow as they receive an official invitation from the director of the event, detailing that participation in this event is exclusive and receiving an invitation indicates their professor sees great potential in them as a future leader within their field. A final component to establishing excitement for this event is through word of mouth from other students that have participated, as well as communications about the professionals that will be at the event and the opportunity to network and get a foot in the door of various companies in the community. From their first freshmen business class, students should hear about the importance of networking with professionals from the business community and therefore they are often excited at their first attempt to network professionally.

## STUDENT PREPARATION

Nominated students should be sent a personalized invitation to the speed networking event approximately 2 weeks prior to the event. After accepting their invitation, students are expected to attend a brief information session where the director of the event addresses:

- Required professional attire
- Proper professional etiquette
- Importance of a strong elevator pitch
- Basic dos and don'ts of networking

This session is brief and serves as a reminder of the skills they have already learned in their previous business classes. They should be provided with a folder of information to help with their preparation of the event. Students should also know which professionals they will be networking with, but students are discouraged from researching the professionals prior to the event. The expectation is set that they will use this opportunity to apply the professional networking skills they have learned in the classroom. While excitement should be created over the opportunity to network with professionals and leave with contacts within the local business community, the students need to also focus on the fact that this is an experiential learning experience and that the professionals are there to critique their professional presence and provide them with feedback. This should be seen as a learning experience first, and a networking experience second. It is recommended that each student send a professional follow-up thank you, either through mail or email, to each business professional that they meet through this event.

## CHOOSING THE “RIGHT” PROFESSIONALS

By the day of the event, students are both excited to meet professionals from the business community as well as apply the skills they have only talked and learned about in the classroom. In order to make this experience most beneficial to these students, it is important that the “right” professionals be chosen. The size of the event depends on the resources available, but the model used by the director of the specific event addressed in this paper uses 26 professionals. The professional participants need to be from a variety of industries in order to spark excitement across all business majors in attendance. Ideally,

regardless of their major, each student will have a chance to network with at least 2 professionals from an

organization related to their major field of interest. This allows students to start establishing their own professional network early in their college career. The “right” business professional will also be someone that realizes the importance of starting a professional network early and willing to be one of the first building blocks of a business major’s network. Finally, the “right” professional will be able to come into the speed networking event and play the role of a professional interacting with someone as though they are at the start of a professional interview, allowing the student to:

- Make a formal introduction
- Give their professional elevator pitch
- Participate in professional small talk
- Ask questions
- Answer questions about their major, career ambitions, etc.

While they are playing the role of a business professional engaging in professional small talk, they also need to take mental notes of areas of improvement which will be useful when completing feedback forms for each student they met. After the event, the feedback forms will be provided to the students. While feedback is encouraged, the main educational focus is practice. The “right” professional will hopefully not judge the student for any professional shortcomings, rather see it as an exceptional learning experience for a student wanting to be their best.

When identifying possible professionals for this event, reaching out through current faculty connections is often the most effective approach. For the event being discussed in this paper, professionals were identified by reaching out to the faculty involved with this event, as well as to alumni that were established within the business community and eager to give back in a mentor-like fashion to their alma matter. Once identified, potential participants were sent an invitation via email. The email must convey three important ideas regarding the event:

1. These are business students that need to practice and grow their networking skills outside of the classroom. While providing feedback is encouraged, it should be understood that the students are still in the “learning and practicing” stages of their professional development.
2. Students may wish to add them to their developing professional network and contact them in the future.
3. This is an opportunity for them to help future business graduates and leaders establish the skills they will need to be successful in their careers. By participating, they will potentially have a great impact on many of tomorrow’s business leaders.

## EVENT EXECUTION

The specific event discussed in this paper was held in a large classroom within the college of business building. There were 26 networking stations set up throughout the room with enough space between each to allow for as much privacy as possible. Each station was preset with a name card identifying the professional at that station, a bottle of water, mints, pen, notepad with evaluation sheets for each student, and a thank you gift for the professional. The professionals were led to their stations before the students arrived and allowed to make themselves comfortable. Once all of the students were present,

they each chose a station to start their speed networking experience and introduced themselves to their professional. A welcome was given by the director of the event and instructions were communicated. Each student was to spend 5 minutes talking to their professional. At the end of the five minutes, a bell would ring and then the student would professionally close the conversation and excuse themselves to the next professional in the rotation. The timer would restart and they would have another 5 minutes with the next professional. There were 6 rounds and the speed networking experience lasted approximately 30 minutes with each student going through their introduction, elevator pitch, small talk/Q and A, and closing with 6 different professionals. The director of the event then gave a thank you to the entire group and directed all participants to a reception area where they could enjoy refreshments and further network with each other in a more casual atmosphere. The reception was also attended by any faculty and administration that wanted to meet with the students and/or meet with and thank the professionals that attended the event. This final reception experience not only allowed the professionals an opportunity to relax and network with each other, it also allowed the students a different type of networking experience that is typical at professional conferences and seminars that they will likely attend during their professional careers.

## FINAL ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSIONS

After learning professional skills in the classroom and then practicing those skills in a professional setting, the learning process is made complete by receiving personalized feedback from each professional with whom they networked. Each professional was provided a feedback form and evaluated the students’ networking and conversation abilities and then provided suggestions for improvement. Given that the participating students appreciated the professional learning and development aspect of this event, they were receptive to any constructive criticism provided. The director of the event also reviewed all feedback to determine if any students needed extra coaching or encouragement in a one-on-one setting. This could be as simple as providing more information about the art of networking or to provide students with additional opportunities around the University and community to continue to practice and improve their networking skills. Students were also allowed to provide their personal feedback on this event. This feedback not only allows for improvements to be made for future events, but it assists with making sure students understand the value of the event and continue to create excitement for future speed networking events amongst their peers.

Successful execution of a speed networking event, such as the one discussed, will provide many levels of benefits. For the professionals involved, it allows them an opportunity to be involved with their local university, network with faculty and students, and give their time to assist with the development of future business professionals. For the university and college of business, this event can put their name in public sight and demonstrate a connection with the local business community, as well as be utilized as a direct measure for AACSB accreditation. Finally, the students practice their professional communication skills with a group of professionals from a variety of industries that can have a direct impact on their future careers. For the specific event discussed in this paper, although a learning experience first, students gained mentors, interview opportunities, and internships through the connections that were made.

## REFERENCES

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