

Tried-and-tested business networking tips and tricks

 By Leigh Andrews

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It's Mandela Month in SA and social wellness month globally. In giving back, Cowe cofounder and CEO Yiannis Gavrielides shares the real reason we find business networking difficult and shares tricks to get better at it, whether you're on the awkward introvert or bubbly extrovert end of the scale.

Picture a work networking event. Are you the life of the party, greeting all with a big smile and handing out your business cards, or the quiet wallflower checking their phone and muttering, "Time is precious, can't the event start already?"

Whichever of these stereotypes you identify more strongly with, there's no denying that networking is a crucial aspect of success, whether you're in work or weekend mode.

Gavrielides learned this early in his career. He's from Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, and explains that Cyprus has a population of about a million, and Nicosia, just under a quarter of a million.



Cowe cofounder and CEO Yiannis Gavrielides

“ Growing up in a small place makes it easy to make friends, you just keep bumping into the same people all the time! When I moved to London to study, I realised that I carried that networking attitude with me. I was also innately aware that building a strong, authentic social circle is important to both my personal and professional life. ”

That's why after a decade of working for large corporates, he quit to make easier networking a mission, in cofounding contact and relationship management platform, Cowe.

Here, Gavrielides explains best practices for managing professional relationships and tricks for breaking the ice and leaving a lasting impression...

 **Let's dive right in. Why do so many of us find networking difficult?**

It's simple: We are scared. We fear rejection. We feel uncomfortable forcing ourselves into a conversation; it makes us feel exposed.

“ To make things worse, that fear makes the conversation awkward and boom, our initial apprehension of rejection becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy! ”

But we can all better prepare for that dreaded networking event, get out of our comfort zone and end up enjoying it, effectively transforming it into a night of socialising.

■ **Let's take a step back before we share a few tips: Explain the importance of networking, from both a professional and personal perspective.**

Everything revolves around people and knowing the right people is the best way to sell, recruit, research, partner-up, merge, innovate, and any other business verb you can think of. Building and maintaining relationships is the best way to get this right.

Assuming you build a strong link, then you can facilitate business directly, through warm introductions. Networking should be authentic and should be part of both our business and professional lives.



Team Cove in a scrum training session.

We are naturally social beings and, assuming we manage to socialise rather than engage in a forced exchange, the process could even make us happier.

I'm sure you've heard of the famous [Harvard-led Adult Development Study](#), which concluded that: "embracing community helps us live longer, and be happier". It's also worth watching the Ted talk by Dr Robert Waldinger on this topic:

■ **Share a few best practices for building professional relationships.**

As you say, it's all about building your relationships and it all starts with meeting people. The opportunities to meet people are endless, starting from the classroom and then moving to the office, to happy hour, to events, whilst indulging in your hobbies, whether that's tennis or braai-ing, and even as you mingle with other parents at kids' activities and parties.



This image of team Covve is titled, "Hello drone."

The trick is to be open to the opportunity to meet people, having no specific agenda in mind, just for the sake of meeting and talking with someone different. This will help you build a more diverse social network.



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Not only is it more enticing to be exposed to different work and life perspectives but it also helps broaden your experiences and knowledge.

A recent study by Yiwei Fang Bill Francis and Iftekhar Hasan found that [CEOs with strong connections](#) to people of different demographic backgrounds and skill sets create higher firm value. Here are some clichés as an example: Are you a banker? Meet an actor! Are you a musician? Socialise with an accountant.

■ **So obvious, yet so few do this. How can we go on to nurture and manage those relationships throughout our careers?**

Staying in touch with people requires effort, especially when our paths diverge, and we become more entrenched in our busy lives and daily routine. We often lose touch with classmates after we graduate, colleagues as we move companies, and other parents when our kids change schools.

Alumni networks help maintain connections but, unless we pursue them personally, they will always result in cold relationships. It's important that we regularly re-engage.

“ Social networks help us stay up to date on what's happening in our lives, but they also drive us apart as we click to congratulate on a new job and 'like' to express our delight to the birth of a friend's child. ”

While conversations should be effortless, the effort to re-engage must be conscious.



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As I debate in a [blog post](#) I wrote a while back, a routine commitment to managing your contact base is one of the most basic things you can do to grow both yourself and your business.

So I take advantage of 'dead' times to connect with people; when driving, when at the airport or just waiting in a queue. I open a "contact this week" list and review any news affecting my contacts and their companies and get down to calling friends. I also ensure I grab an opportunity to meet if I can, especially if it's been a while. I go by the rule **call instead of texting, meet instead of calling**.

■ **Let's end with the secret everyone wants to know: how best to break the ice and leave a good impression while networking.**

It's not a big secret but, as with everything, make sure you **prepare well**. For example, before an event, review who is attending and list who you'd like to meet. Read up about the industry, the companies, recent trends and news.



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When there, see **who is open to talk**. You do this by assessing their body language and approaching people who are alone or small groups that seem open and are glancing around the space; or move near the bar where people are easier to engage with.

If you're already with someone, **ensure that your body language is open**, so others will feel comfortable approaching you and welcome and facilitate introductions between everyone.

Then, **start a conversation**: try and find common ground to build rapport, but make sure you don't overwhelm them and remain modest.



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As you build confidence, you may even choose to expose a weakness of yours in the discussion – maybe as a funny, clumsy or embarrassing moment – the “pratfall effect” argues that doing so can make you more likeable.

If possible, try to mix some **personal conversation** too, not only work.

“ If you build a connection, exchange contact details, but don't just hand out business cards for the sake of it. If you feel there is no rapport move on, don't let it drag. ”

Just be polite and don't be put off. After the event, follow-up, mentioning items discussed or actions agreed, and arrange to meet up again.

The key is to start enjoying it, which can only be done if you make sure that you – and thus the experience and the relationship – are all authentic!

Hear, hear! As it's social wellness month, there's no better time to put your new-found skills to good use. Be sure to visit [Covve](#), follow Gavrielides on the following social media channels and share your own business networking tricks in the comment section below: [LinkedIn](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Instagram](#)

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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