Dale Carnegie, who wrote the bestselling book How to Win Friends and Influence People, asserts that you can make more contacts in two months by becoming interested in others’ work than by spending two years trying to get them interested in yours.

But how can this help your science career? Simple. Developing a network of mutually beneficial contacts can ease any of your career challenges — from changing job, to securing a grant or getting a promotion or recommendation.

Networking is a give-and-take process that requires a genuine interest in and focus on others. It is not limited to the staged and formal gatherings of experts; it happens naturally all the time. Everyone, even a social acquaintance outside your profession, is a potential resource who may know someone or something that will prove useful to your career. Move beyond your usual sphere of influence to diversify your network of people and ideas. Start with a fairly comfortable venue and progress to more personally challenging situations.

To ease into first-time conversations, develop a three-part introduction that includes your name, your speciality or focus, and an interesting point of distinction. If you can get past the introduction and are a good listener, you’ll be ready on any occasion with a flowing response to the recurring question: “So, what do you do?” If you are seeking assistance beyond the introduction, be concise and specific in your request. Get to the point, be considerate of time, and listen as much as you speak.

Remember, you need to add value as well as make requests. So consider the support, information and resources that you can contribute. Help others by reviewing manuscripts for journals, serving on study sections for granting bodies, taking part in professional associations, speaking on alumni panels, adopting a collaborative approach at work and sharing credit with those who have helped you.

Networking is a vital force in both getting work and getting work done. To enjoy the benefits, steer clear of the ‘me, me, me’ mindset and focus on what you can do for others.

With Deb Koen
Careers consultant

Movers
Per Ahlberg, Professor of Evolutionary Organismal Biology, Uppsala University, Sweden

1989: PhD in Zoology, University of Cambridge

Ahlberg views his recognition of the need for balance. A series of related findings led to a post at London’s Natural History Museum. But after nearly a decade, the pendulum had swung too far in the other direction. He had plenty of time for research and travel, but was missing teaching. “I like the contact with the undergrads,” Ahlberg says. And the 90-minute journey to work in central London took a toll, particularly after the birth of his daughter in 2001. The Uppsala appointment resolves all those issues, he says. He has the right teaching load now, and the office is a five-minute bike ride from home. Ahlberg sums up his career with a simple statement: “I was able to recognize some things that hadn’t been recognized.” The same might be said for his recognition of the need for balance.