

## **Professional Networking for Business Analysts**

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What do you know about the state of the business analyst profession in your local area? How many business analysts do you know outside of your team or company? If you run across a sticky problem, do you have a network of people to call on to help? If you woke up tomorrow and found yourself out of a job, who do you know that could help you find your next opportunity?

These are important questions for any professional but in reality, many of us avoid networking like the plague, creating a void in our professional knowledge and relationships. I myself would have answered “I don’t know” or “not much” to many of the above questions about a year ago and I had spoken to only a few business analysts outside of the interviewing I did to fill open positions. Then I found myself discontent with my job and out digging up contract business analyst positions. You can bet I learned to network quickly. But I started from behind. While I had been working, I could have been building a professional network. Instead, I was out of work and out of touch.

In this article, we’ll talk about professional networking as a set of activities to build mutually beneficial relationships with people in your profession or industry. Most professionals blend a mix of in-person and online networking to build relationships in their local area and with like-minded professionals outside their local area.

### **Set some networking objectives**

Networking can quickly become a consuming activity. It’s important you set a few objectives upfront that support your overall professional goals and choose networking opportunities to support those objectives. Some possible objectives for a business analyst might be:

- Learning about the business analyst profession;
- Understanding the state of the profession in your location or target location;
- Establishing mutually-beneficial relationships with other professionals;
- Contributing to the professional community;
- Finding your next position.

Finding the next position is purposely last on the list. Many people wait until they are out of work and then focus their networking on finding a job. You’ll lose out on the real opportunities because you are seeking to get more than you give out of every event and person you meet. If

you pick one or two of the prior objectives, you will eventually be in a better situation for finding your next position.

## **Professional meetings**

Attending local professional meetings is a great way to meet local professionals with like-minded interests. The obvious place to start is by attending your local IIBA<sup>®</sup> chapter meetings. But also look for opportunities in related professions, such as project management, business process management, and quality assurance. Consider software development process groups, such as a RUP group or agile group and industry-specific groups. For example, I tend to work mostly on web-based applications, so I have been exploring web development and design groups in Denver. I use [www.meet-up.com](http://www.meet-up.com) to find many local events.

It's important when you attend the meeting that you talk to people. Set a reasonable objective, say of meeting two or three new people. Another feasible objective is to meet one person who you'd like to meet for coffee sometime. Be prepared with business cards and collect contact information. Send an email to each new person you met the following day.

Professional meetings are valuable because they expose you to new ideas and provide an opportunity to meet new professionals. While presentations can vary in quality, if you take away one learning from a presentation, it was worthwhile.

## **Informational Interviews / One-on-one meetings**

If you are searching for a job or exploring a new career, informational interviews are a way to learn more about your target position or industry. As you meet people at networking events and you feel you'd like to chat with them further, ask if they would like to meet for coffee sometime to discuss their company, career, or project. People love to talk about themselves. You will be surprised at how many people will respond positively to one-on-one meetings.

It's in one-on-one meetings where you can really start to build a relationship. Be prepared with some questions for the other person. Consider asking about how they manage requirements, what tools they use, how their process works, or what vendors they rely on. Gain insight on their perspective and how you might help them.

## **Reaching out to connections you already have**

Networking is not just about meeting new people; it's also about keeping in touch with people with whom you've built relationships. These people include colleagues from past jobs, people you meet at networking events, and individuals you've met in a non-professional context, including friends, family and others with common interests. You want to consistently stay in touch so that in the event you want to ask for help, your request is not coming out of the blue.

Some ideas for staying in touch include:

- Monthly email (these can be purely professional updates, talk about books you've read, or share interesting experiences),
- Passing along books or websites you find that would interest a specific person,
- Holiday and/or birthday cards,
- Specifically reaching out to people you've met at professional meetings the next time you see them.

Whatever method or combination of methods you choose, keep an up-to-date contact list and make a point to stay in touch with the people you've met.

## **Participating in online social networks**

Online networking provides multiple benefits. By engaging with your peers online, you will meet a broader range of people, providing opportunities to learn from more diverse perspectives but also find people with multiple shared interests. It is not unlikely that you might find someone with a very similar professional background or who is working on a similar project. But online networking also builds up your "online professional profile". Take a minute and put your name into your favorite search engine. What comes up? Is your online presence a reflection of your professional identity?

Start online networking by exploring a few social networking sites for business analysts. Some active sites include:

- IIBA Community Network Site ([www.community.theiiba.org](http://www.community.theiiba.org))
- Modern Analyst ([www.modernanalyst.com](http://www.modernanalyst.com))
- StickyMinds (<http://stickyminds.com>)
- LinkedIn groups -- several groups have been formed to specifically discuss business analysis topics.

You can linger for awhile, but you will get the most benefit from participating in the discussions. Comment on an article, respond to a forum question, or engage with the people in discussions about the profession. You will learn more about your perspective by articulating it in writing and you'll receive feedback on your ideas.

As you find people with whom you share common interests or with whom you are interested in initiating a relationship, introduce yourself through email or establish a connection through LinkedIn. Look for ways to continue the dialog in a way that is meaningful for both of you. Consider a phone call to discuss a common project you are working on or issue you are facing.

## What about Twitter?

Twitter is an online medium for sharing 140 character “tweets” with an online community. People use Twitter for a variety of reasons and it definitely has its share of overt, aggressive marketers. But buried within Twitter are also some gems of professional relationships. You can follow [Kevin Brennan](#) and [Julian Sammy](#) of IIBA and keep up-to-date with what’s going on with the organization. There are also several business analysts who regularly share blog articles and engage in dialogs about BA topics across Twitter. Twitter is a way to stay in touch between phone conversations and face-to-face meetings. I find I have a closer connection with the people I follow on Twitter because gaps in discussion are filled with an awareness of what they are doing and reading.

Find me on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/ClearSpringBA](http://www.twitter.com/ClearSpringBA) and if you are getting started on Twitter, check out my [suggested business analysts to follow](#).

## Paying it forward

Professional networking is more about what you can give to others than what you can get for yourself. A common mantra you’ll hear among the best networkers is “pay it forward” or “give more than you expect to receive.” What this means is that when you are networking, offer to help others. Help can mean passing on a relevant resource, offering to review a resume, or simply responding to a question or comment.

Most people focus more on what they can get out of a relationship than what they can contribute to it. The irony is that if you focus more on helping others than on helping yourself, your network will be there for you when you need it most.

## Some final thoughts

Networking (online and off) can be a consuming and sometimes distracting activity. It’s important you set personal goals for what you want to achieve through networking and regularly assess yourself against these goals. Are you learning? Are you meeting with the right people? Are you finding new opportunities? Are you asking the right questions? Are you building real relationships with the people you are meeting?

Like much of what we do, it’s important to focus on quality over quantity. It’s about attending the right events in the right frame of mind to make them worthwhile, not just showing up. Quality in networking means quality conversations, quality relationships, and quality learning opportunities.

It’s time to get started. You might consider setting a goal to attend one professional meeting in the next two weeks and contributing to one online professional network. Professional networking does not have to be overwhelming if you take it one step at a time.

## About the Author

Laura Brandau is the Career Center Product Manager for IIBA<sup>®</sup> and supports the business analyst profession by hosting Bridging the Gap ([www.bridging-the-gap.com](http://www.bridging-the-gap.com)), a blog to help professionals become better business analysts and advance their careers. Laura recently published [How to Start a Business Analyst Career](#), an eBook serving as a guide for professionals seeking to become business analysts, including a section on professional networking as a means to kick-start your career. Laura is also an independent business analyst consultant, founding Clear Spring Business Analysis to help organizations realize their best ideas.