

NETWORKING

8 Questions to Ask Someone Other Than “What Do You Do?”

by David Burkus

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We’ve all been in the awkward situation of meeting someone new and having to build rapport quickly — at networking events, industry conferences, charity events, dinner parties, and other social-professional situations. If you’re like many people — especially most Americans — you break the awkward silence with a pretty standard question:

“So, what do you do?”

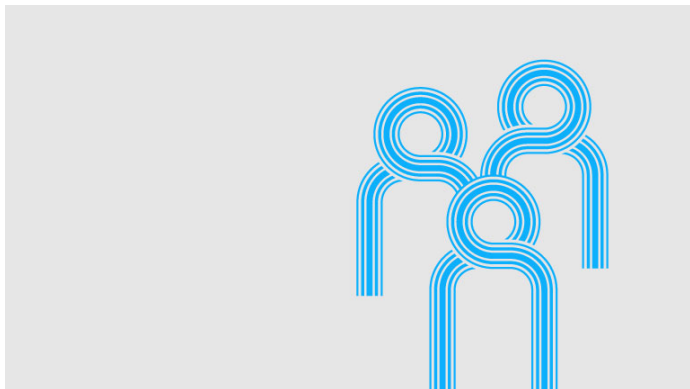
But that question might not be the best way to build rapport with someone else. In fact, it may be best to avoid talking about work entirely.

Research findings from the world of network science and psychology suggests that we tend to prefer and seek out relationships where there is more than one context for connecting with the other person. Sociologists refer to these as *multiplex ties*, connections where there is an overlap of roles or affiliations from a different social context. If a colleague at work sits on the same nonprofit board as you, or sits next to you in spin class at the local gym, then you two share a multiplex tie. We may prefer relationships with multiplex ties because research suggests that relationships built on multiplex ties tend to be richer, more trusting, and longer lasting. We see this in our everyday lives: The work friend who is also a “friend friend” is far more likely to stick with you should one of you change jobs. And it goes the other way, too: People who have at least one real friend at work report liking their jobs more.

Which brings us back to the problem of using “So, what do you do?” as your opener.

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Assuming you’re already at a work-related networking event or meeting another person in a work context, the question quickly sets a boundary around the conversation that the other person is now a “work” contact. It’s possible you might discover another commonality and build a multiplex tie, but it’s far less likely to happen in that conversation.

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likely to find multiple commonalities and turn your new contacts into a multiplex tie – and maybe even a friend:

What excites you right now? This is a question that has a wide range of possible answers. It gives others the ability to give with a work-related answer, or talk about their kids, or their new boat, or basically anything that excites them.

What are you looking forward to? This question works for the same reason, but is more forward-looking than backward-looking, allowing others to choose from a bigger set of possible answers.

What's the best thing that happened to you this year? Similar to the previous two, but reversed: more backward-looking than forward-looking. Regardless, it's an open-ended question that gives others a wealth of answers to choose from.

Where did you grow up? This question dives into others' backgrounds (but in a much less assertive and loaded way than "Where are you from?") and allows them to answer with simple details from childhood or to engage in their story of how they got to where they are right now and what they're doing.

What do you do for fun? This question steers the conversation away from work, unless of course they are lucky enough to do for work what they'd be doing for fun anyway. Even then, it's understood as a non-work question and the most likely answers will probably

Instead, consider beginning your introductory questions with something deliberately non-work-related and trusting that the context of the meeting will eventually steer the conversation back to work-related topics.

Toward that end, here's a few questions you could start with that will leave you more

establish non-work ties.

Who is your favorite superhero? This might seem random, but it's one of my favorites. Occasionally, asking this question has led me to bond over the shared love of a character, but more often you'll find a shared connection or two in the reason for why the other person chose that particular character...or why they're not really into superheroes.

Is there a charitable cause you support? Another big, open-ended question (assuming they support at least one charitable cause). It's important to define support as broader than financial donations, as support might be in the form of volunteering or just working to raise awareness. You're also really likely to either find shared ground or find out about a cause you didn't know about.

What's the most important thing I should know about you? This one is effective for similar reasons as many of the above, plus it gives the broadest possible range from which they can choose. It can come off as a little forthright, so when to use it depends on a lot of contextual clues.

Regardless of which question you choose, the important thing is to ask a question open-ended enough to allow others to select non-work answers if they choose. Doing so will increase the chances that you didn't just turn a stranger into a new contact on your phone, but that you actually made a new friend.



David Burkus is the best-selling author of three books, including the forthcoming *Friend of a Friend*, and Associate Professor of Leadership and Innovation at Oral Roberts University. For more information, visit his website.

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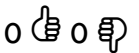
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JIM THOMAS 9 hours ago

My favorite question is -"What made you want to attend this event?"

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