



Networking in the osteoarthritis research community in the digital era

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ABSTRACT

Networking is a vital skill for osteoarthritis (OA) researchers, offering pathways to collaboration, visibility, and career development. Recognising the evolving nature of networking in the digital era, the OARSI Early Career Investigator (ECI) Committee hosted a workshop at the 2025 OARSI World Congress titled “Navigating Networking: Strategies for Connecting Across Cultures and Personalities.” This editorial summarises key insights from the session’s expert presentations and panel discussion. Dr Jocelyn Bowden highlighted the enduring value of face-to-face networking for rapport-building, encouraging ECIs to approach interactions with curiosity and preparation. Dr Jackie Whittaker explored virtual networking and personality-based strategies, noting that aligning communication methods with individual preferences can enhance engagement. She stressed that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Professor Tobias Winkler provided guidance on industry networking, underscoring the importance of understanding corporate decision-making processes and collaboration dynamics. The session closed with reflections on cultural competence and the role of authenticity in communication. While digital tools may support networking, the speakers agreed that genuine, personalised interactions remain essential. Across all formats, researchers were encouraged to build inclusive, diverse networks grounded in sincerity and mutual respect. For those unable to attend, this summary offers practical strategies to support effective networking across platforms, cultures, and career stages.

Networking offers many benefits for osteoarthritis (OA) researchers at all career stages. It can connect researchers with shared goals, open doors to collaborations and job opportunities, and increase visibility – not only for the individual, but also for their team, institution, funders, and collaborators [1]. Networking facilitates knowledge exchange, introduces fresh perspectives, and can provide valuable emotional and practical support. With the growing use of digital platforms, networking has also evolved – enabling new ways to connect virtually across

institutions, disciplines, and countries, while also posing new challenges for engagement and authenticity. Yet people experience networking differently. For some, it comes naturally. For others, especially trainees and researchers in their early careers, it can feel awkward or anxiety-inducing [2]. The good news is that networking is a skill, one that can be developed and refined with practice.

To support early career investigators in building this skill, the OARSI ECI Committee hosted a workshop at the 2025 OARSI World Congress

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titled “Navigating Networking: Strategies for Connecting Across Cultures and Personalities.” The session featured three expert presentations followed by a panel discussion. This editorial summarises key takeaways from the workshop for those unable to attend and for the wider OA research community.

1. Face-to-face networking

Dr. Jocelyn Bowden opened the session by highlighting the continued value of in-person networking in an increasingly digital world. She noted that these interactions can take place at conferences and formal meetings as well as less formal gatherings like social events or chance encounters. Face-to-face interactions are advantageous for the interpretation of body language, vocal tone, and non-verbal cues which are often lost in virtual formats. It also avoids the technical issues that can disrupt online communication, supporting more natural, fluid conversations and helping to build rapport.

Rather than approaching face-to-face networking solely for career advancement, Dr. Bowden encouraged participants to ‘simply start a conversation’ and to get curious about the stories of people both inside and outside of their specific goals. She reflected that effective in-person networking is built on authenticity, active listening, and curiosity, and advised researchers to ask about others’ interests, share their own, and remain self-aware, ensuring conversations are balanced and inclusive. Presentation matters too – open body language, eye contact, and a genuine smile can help create a positive impression. For networking at planned events such as the OARSI World Congress, Dr. Bowden recommended reviewing the program, abstracts, and attendee list in advance to identify key individuals whose work peaks their interests, as well as potential discussion topics. She also encouraged people to consider what they might want to gain from networking and prepare a short “elevator pitch” about themselves and their work. If people were unsure how to begin, asking colleagues for introductions was recommended, as was rehearsing with a colleague beforehand to ease nerves. Importantly, ECIs were reminded to build diverse networks by engaging with people across disciplines, career stages, and sectors – including clinicians, government, industry, and, critically, people with OA. Dr. Bowden emphasised that these diverse perspectives are not only essential for designing, implementing, and evaluating impactful research, but can also lead to lifelong friendships and stronger collaborations.

2. Virtual networking and personality type considerations

Dr. Jackie Whittaker continued the session by discussing the value and challenges of virtual networking, broadly defined as the use of digital platforms including videoconferencing, online events, social media, podcasts, messaging apps, and email to build professional connections. The many advantages of virtual networking were described, such as removing geographic barriers, increasing accessibility, and allowing for flexible engagement across time zones and schedules. It can also help researchers strategically spark or strengthen collaborations, build and communicate a professional identity, and boost visibility within specific communities. However, virtual networking is not without its challenges. Many researchers can experience digital fatigue or feel overscheduled from constantly being online. Technology can also be a barrier, as stable and secure internet access is not always guaranteed, and it can be difficult to read social cues in digital interactions, which reduces spontaneity and connection.

Dr. Whittaker noted that different personality types may thrive in different digital environments and that if the chosen format does not suit someone’s communication style, it can feel disengaging. To help participants reflect on their preferences, she introduced a personality continuum – from introverts who gain energy from solitude to extroverts who are energised by group interaction. Attendees were encouraged to consider where they may fall on the spectrum and use this to guide their networking strategies. For example, introverted individuals may prefer

asynchronous tools (e.g. email or discussion forums) and one-to-one or small-group conversations that allow more time for reflection and responding thoughtfully. In contrast, extroverts might enjoy live sessions, interactive panels, or even hosting virtual discussions. Respecting differences in energy, communication styles, and pace helps ensure digital connections are mutually rewarding. For example, an extrovert reaching out to an introvert may need to allow more space for reflection and slower responses and vice versa. Dr. Whittaker also noted that people may find it helpful to explore personality assessment tools (e.g. *DISC Personality Tests* or *16Personalities*) to reflect on their preferences.

To conclude, Dr Whittaker emphasised that there is “no one-size-fits-all approach” to networking. She encouraged researchers to let their personality traits inspire their approaches, while noting that, regardless of this, successful virtual networking should involve setting realistic goals, being intentional in follow-up communication, and showing up with authenticity.

3. Networking with industry

The final speaker, Professor Tobias Winkler offered insights into how networking with industry differs from academic settings and why recognising these differences is essential. One of the key takeaways was that effective engagement with industry requires an understanding of how companies make decisions and manage change.

Professor Winkler explained how industry partners typically operate with a different mindset than academic researchers. Their decisions are shaped by long-term strategic objectives, global market conditions, and internal corporate roadmaps [3]. These decisions are often made years in advance and are influenced by external factors such as emerging trends, political shifts, regulatory developments, and trade dynamics [4, 5]. External events can also lead to rapid changes in company priorities. For example, geopolitical tensions or changes in trade policy may prompt a shift in product focus or geographic presence [6].

Equally important is understanding how a company’s financial structure affects its approach to collaboration. Publicly funded organisations tend to be more conservative, while start-ups or firms supported by venture capital or private funding often have a higher tolerance for risk and a greater focus on innovation following capital investment [7, 8]. However, risk appetite is not purely financial. Internal dynamics, such as leadership confidence or preference for control, can also shape a company’s willingness to pursue less conventional financing strategies or collaborative approaches [9].

Professor Winkler also noted that company size can influence collaboration dynamics. Larger corporations often have more bureaucratic processes and multiple layers of decision-making, which can limit flexibility. However, once committed, these organisations can offer considerable resources and implementation capacity. He emphasised that challenges to collaboration are not limited to the industry side. Academic institutions may also present barriers, including differing expectations, bureaucratic complexity, intellectual property concerns, and limited connectivity between academic researchers and industry stakeholders. Knowing and learning about all these characteristics and challenges makes academic networking with corporate partners exciting and successful.

4. Final reflections

The workshop concluded with reflections from Dr. Chunyi Wen, Associate Professor Jos Runhaar, and Professor Mohit Kapoor who touched on the importance of cultural awareness in professional networking. They discussed how norms around hierarchy, formality, and communication styles can vary across regions. In some settings, indirect communication may be preferred; in others, a direct approach is expected. The panellists encouraged researchers to approach cross-cultural interactions with openness, respect, and a willingness to listen and learn, reminding attendees that cultural competence is developed gradually through experience and reflection.

When asked about artificial intelligence, the response was unanimous – while AI-based tools may assist with drafting or editing written communication, they should not replace the researcher's own voice. Generic or AI-generated messages are often impersonal and may fail to make a positive impression. In contrast, communications that reflect genuine interest, contextual awareness, and relevance to the recipient are far more likely to foster engagement.

Across the session, one consistent message emerged – early career investigators were encouraged to focus on authenticity and not get caught up on perfection. A simple introduction, a thoughtful question, a genuine follow-up can be the beginning of a meaningful professional relationship. Regardless of personality or communication style, effective networking is grounded in sincerity, curiosity, and mutual respect.

Contributions

CW, RKN, AM conceived the idea. The editorial was drafted by RKN. All authors revised it critically and approved the final draft.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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