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Among the much-touted events at most meetings of professional societies are the mixers. I avoid them whenever possible. Noisy, smoke-filled rooms don't appeal to me. Banquets also leave much to be desired and usually discourage, rather than promote social interaction. Cocktail parties are not much better. Clinging to their drinks, most participants gravitate towards old friends. Once in a great while, a young, reluctant, but determined participant will approach a stranger. Maybe he is familiar with the other person's research. With some throat-clearing and perhaps an apology, he will endeavor to introduce himself. Once this social hurdle has been leaped, an interesting exchange of information may ensue--if both of them are lucky. Even now, in the age of the liberated woman, overcoming the social obstacle of the initial contact may be just as difficult for the females as for the males in attendance.

Many studies have confirmed that one of the most important functions of professional meetings is to facilitate social contacts. In one recent study, E.B. Peters of International Sociotechnical Sys-

tems surveyed the literature, finding that, "A growing body of empirical research shows that information *which is actually put to use* is most often transmitted by personal contact [italics added]." Why then does it seem that the design of these meetings often makes it extremely difficult to meet people? Excessively long, formal programs not only dilute the impact of individual contributions, but also inhibit beneficial person-to-person contacts. It just takes up too much time to listen to papers that are better understood in written form. I propose that we change all this. I think we ought to devote the first day of every meeting to what I call "information encounter groups."

Here's how it could work. For meetings with more than 100 persons in attendance, I would assign each person to one of several small groups of about 30 persons. This could be done according to research specialty, or preferably by a purely arbitrarily procedure such as casting lots. Each of these "encounter" groups would be assigned a meeting room. During the first morning's session, each member would be asked to speak for a maximum of five minutes. Each person

would provide biographical information, describe his or her present organization, and the role he or she plays in it. Most important, participants would briefly discuss some of the specific types of problems they encounter in performing professional tasks. With coffee breaks, this introductory session would last two or three hours.

The afternoon session would be devoted to a follow-up discussion of the morning's presentations. Those members who are particularly experienced, sympathetic, aggressive, or just gregarious might offer comments and advice to their colleagues. A strong chairman or discussion leader would help to focus and direct what could otherwise become a rather loose, disjointed session. The original biographical presentations would be reviewed and participants would ask clarifying questions or make appropriate comments. I suspect that great benefits--both to the experienced and to the neophytes--might be derived from these discussions, which would inevitably cover a wide range of problems.

If this proposal is not appealing to all members, a special effort should be made to organize information encounter groups for those who are participating in national meetings for the first time. I imagine there would be no problem finding veteran meeting aficionados who could act as group leaders. If records are properly kept, it would be possible to arrange

each succeeding year's groups to insure that each member meets the maximum number of new people.

Recently, as Chairman of the 13th National Information Retrieval Colloquium which is held in Philadelphia each year, I tried this experiment on a small scale. Each registrant was randomly assigned to a luncheon table large enough for ten people. Group leaders were assigned to each table. Their job was to elicit the type of information described above. This eliminated all the usual unproductive amenities between neighbors at the typical banquet. In less than half an hour everyone had made eight or nine new acquaintances and learned something about other people's problems. Furthermore, since all participants were asked to describe their expectations regarding the meeting program, this information was useful in guiding the discussion that followed the regular presentations.

Information encounter groups would facilitate contacts between the younger and older members, the experienced and the inexperienced, the new members and the old. Even old pros might learn a great deal from newcomers to the field, and the neophytes would undoubtedly welcome an opportunity to break the ice with the experts. Not only would such groups benefit the participants professionally and academically--they might even make meetings a bit more pleasant.

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1. **Peters E B.** International scientific and technical meetings: why go?... who profits? *R & D Management* 5:139-47, 1975.