

Professional Women Meet in Lyon for Networking in Anglo-French Style

In March 2000, two professional women met for the first time at a regular meeting of the American Club in Lyon. Teresa Cooper Kislik and Catherine Bassompierre got to chatting, hit upon the subject of professional networking, and decided to try something.

A few months later, they held the first meeting of the Professional Women's Networking Group. Twenty women came to that first meeting. Today, two years later, there are regular monthly meetings attended by an average of twenty to thirty people every time, with over a hundred people on the mailing list.

Teresa and Catherine founded the group because they both found a need for a forum to share professional experience, network and share advice and resources, and provide opportunities for career development for English-speaking working women in Lyon. And of course, Catherine stresses, to have fun at the same time.

Teresa quotes James Clemence, Director of Management Development at Peat Marwick: "80% of all jobs are found through networking." Although the statistics vary slightly, there is no question that today networking is an essential skill. My image of networking had always been something, perhaps a bit more serious, or 'male.' As a result, I had never considered myself a great networker until I realized there's not just one definition of networking. Networking isn't just collecting a stack of business cards at a cocktail party, or more likely today 'beaming' each other with a Palm, it's a complex but simple on-going fun process applicable to every passion! Visibility within your profession is synonymous with networking."

Each monthly meeting is held in the evening, from 7 - 9 pm, at a meeting place within walking distance of the Lyon-Part Dieu train station. The first hour is generally dedicated to informal networking and a light buffet snack. That's usually followed by a guest speaker or a facilitated discussion. Some of the guest speakers of the group's meetings have been Seth Copely, author of Commercial Break, The Couch Potato's Guide to Fitness; Alison Hoegy on the topic of managing stress; and Kerri Orders, who spoke about the challenges of working in a French multinational company and

managing a international team. Plans for future meetings include the topics of starting a business in France, e-learning, and building networking skills. The group is actively seeking guest speakers for future meetings.

The Women's Professional Networking Group has developed a monthly newsletter which often has "help wanted" ads, and a CV/Job Search Database developed by members Henriette Vollmers-Hansen and Helen Mitchell. Teresa notes, "Thanks to incredible networking skills, our team is working on linking us to the Paris network."

At the meetings and in between, the women who meet each other through the WPNG share information and advice. There are frequently questions (and answers) about legal issues of working in France (for example, employment contracts, remuneration, negotiation, French business style); about looking for employment (contacts, CV deveopment, recruitment agencies, interviewing skills); and about personal hobbies (sports/gyms, travel, furniture painting, wine tours, cooking, restaurants.)

The group's networking activities have produced some striking results. A few job openings and job seekers have found a match: one of the members is now working as an international marketing coordinator in a local high tech company, another is now an assistant in a language school. "Perhaps most important," adds Catherine, "and something that's difficult to measure, is that our get-togethers keep everyone motivated and moving forward. That's especially important for those who are currently in a 'job seek' process."

Not all the activities of the group are strictly business. This past March, the group went on a ski outing to Deux Alpes, just for the fun of it. "Of course we end up organizing some social events," says Catherine. "We're helping each other professionally, but it's also a great way to get to know new people, and make new friends."

If you are interested in attending a meeting of the Women's Professional Networking Group, or have a suggestion for a guest speaker, Teresa and Catherine can be reached at 06 71 17 87 43, 06 18 09 10 08 or via email: cbassompierre@voila.fr and cooperkislik@compuserve.com.

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