



# FAST WORKERS

*Speed networking is like business on steroids. Armed with their 30-second pitch, professionals are finding that it's perfectly OK to cut the chitchat, make snap judgements and move on.*  
*By Victoria Kyriakopoulos.*

**L**ooking apprehensive, 33-year-old Vicki Blanch takes her place in the suit-clad crowd gathered at Melbourne's Langham hotel. The shy brunette, one of only a handful of women in the room, has three minutes per candidate to tout her wares.

This is speed networking – a spin-off of speed dating where, instead of swapping flirty chitchat, hopefuls trade job descriptions and business cards. The cacophony in the conference room foyer escalates as the 40 delegates at this power industry conference network in a scene akin to a steroid-enhanced Japanese business-card exchange. Most are dispensing with small talk and getting down to brass tacks, launching into what the Americans have called their “elevator speech” – a 30-second spiel on who they are and what they do.

Forty minutes later, having worked about half the room, most participants have wandered off to debrief over coffee and mini fruit flans. Two men are

comparing business cards as if they were swap cards: “How many did you get?”

Blanch, a senior manager at the Melbourne office of energy consultants Saha International, seems both relieved and invigorated after her first attempt at speed networking. “It was good for me. I'm naturally shy and would never talk to anyone if at all possible,” she says. “And it's only three minutes. Some people you want to talk to for longer but with other people, you're thinking, ‘Is it time yet?’”

Blanch could well have been describing speed dating, the inspiration behind this no-nonsense networking. Invented by a Los Angeles rabbi in 1998 as a way for Jewish singles to size up marriage candidates, speed dating has spread through pubs and bars in Australia where it's evolved into targeted events catering to niches from wine lovers and salsa fans to gay men, lesbians and the very tall.

Sydney-based conference organisers Terrapinn have included speed networking in all their events for nearly two years. “We don't have sit-down lunches any more because you met so few people,” says Terrapinn's managing director, Symon Rubens. “And people love it. You're not going to close a deal but you are going to meet everyone.”

Anyone who's ever been stuck at a corporate do and run out of conversation before entree, or been exposed to the networking shark whose eyes glaze over once they realise you're of no use, will appreciate the etiquette advantages of speed networking. There's no need to worry about being socially mercenary. In the speed world, it's OK to make instant assumptions about the other person's value

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or profitability and move on – no hard feelings. In fact, it's expected. Even if you hit it off, you must hit the road when the bell sounds. A fundamental premise of speed dating is that you can be ruthless because you make up your mind about a potential partner in the first seconds anyway. The power of first impressions can be equally potent in business, whether it's about appearance, body language or voice.

"People are looking for effective ways to maximise the number of connections," says Amanda Nissman, whose company, Networking for Professionals, holds monthly speed networking events in New York. "This allows them to meet a lot of contacts, then follow up later and build relationships."

Globally, the rapid approach is creeping into areas such as recruitment, where speed interviewing is used to select graduates at career fairs or campus recruitment drives or to filter low-level candidates who have similar credentials. Candidates are assessed on the basis of five- to 15-minute meetings and short-listed for traditional interviews. The approach is being increasingly used in the UK, US and Canada: Quebec-based company Videotron held Canada's largest speed recruitment drive last October to hire employees ranging from architects to technicians. It's too soon to predict the long-term success of such a technique but, says Videotron's communications manager, Isabelle Dessureault, "By the end of the day, we had filled 200 of the 300 positions. It will definitely be used again because it saves a lot of time and effort."

Such an approach has yet to take off in Australia but last year, the University of South Australia held

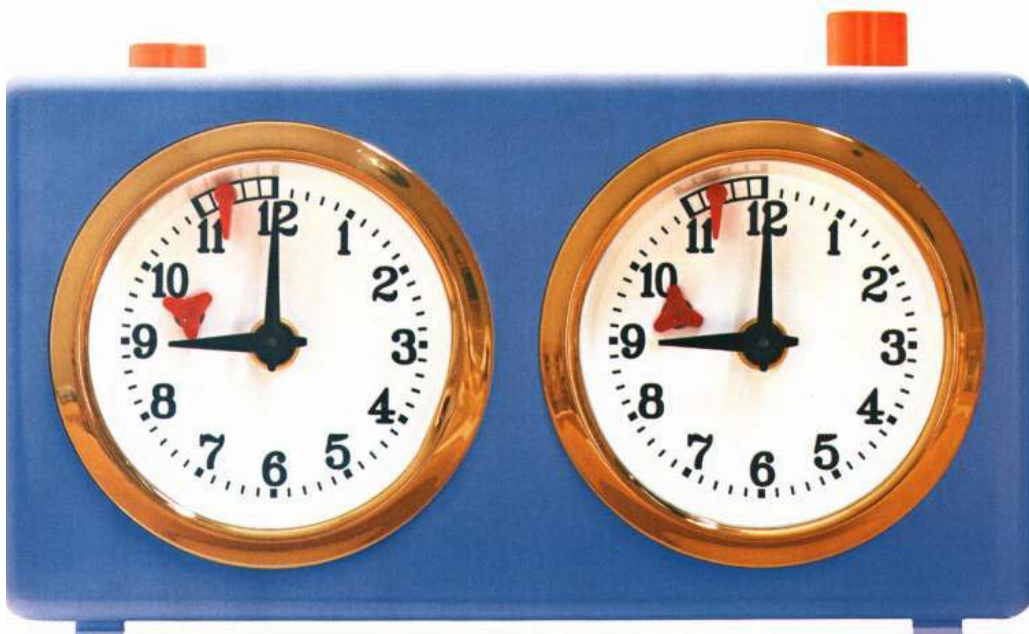
a dinner version of speed networking aimed at hooking up graduates with business leaders.

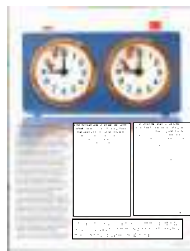
After their first – and sell-out – speed-networking events last year, the Australian Businesswomen's Network is planning similar events in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane for September. "Everyone loved it," says national general manager Suzi Dafnis. "The only complaint was that it was very noisy because people were having so much fun."

Dafnis says participants were "primed" to practise their elevator pitch and given advice on how to follow up leads. "It's about how you capitalise on that opportunity because you only have a couple of minutes in front of someone," she says. "It's about making sure you communicate what value you can offer to that person. It's like writing advertising copy. Where you have limited words, you use the most powerful ones you can. And you can usually tell within a few moments whether there's a future business relationship."

In fact, recruitment experts suggest impressions are formed in as little as 30 seconds. In *Blink: The Power Of Thinking Without Thinking*, author Malcolm Gladwell narrows those snap, often unconscious judgements down to two seconds; what he dubs the "blink" response. Gladwell asserts that these blink-of-an-eye decisions can be as precise as months of analysis. It's what psychologists call "thin-slicing", where people make intuitive decisions based on slivers of information or considering a few key variables, while discarding other details.

"When it comes to something like dating, we all readily admit to the importance of what happens





in the first instant when two people meet," writes Gladwell. "But we don't admit to the importance of what happens in the first two seconds when someone encounters a new idea or we interview someone for a job or when a military general has to make a decision in the heat of the battle."

While Gladwell advocates paying more attention to those fleeting moments, he also warns there is good and bad cognition; racial, sexual and physical characteristics may trigger deep-seated biases.

Amanda Nissman points out that while speed networking gives participants 30 seconds to discern a connection, it also offers people a chance to talk to someone they may have otherwise dismissed. "A lot of us have preconceived ideas and prejudice," she says. "You end up talking to people you might not naturally gravitate to and it may surprise you."

"You can make a judgement call straightaway but it is about evaluating those impressions and validating them, otherwise you are not doing justice to the client or the candidate," argues Amanda Earle, executive consultant from Melbourne-based management recruitment firm Oppeus.

"Gut" hires can be costly so employers often use complex psychometric testing to assess candidates, particularly senior managers. "Things like speed

recruitment are risky when you look at the cost of a bad recruitment choice," she says, adding that firms that do 20-minute interviews give short guarantees on placements. Such caution is well placed. Hiring the wrong candidate can cost between 30 and 200 per cent of that person's annual salary, according to a 2003 report from Drake International.

There are also broader sociological implications, says Earle. "What effect does it have on someone when you are illustrating that you are only prepared to invest five minutes in them?" she asks.

Others suggest it is not necessarily a bad way to initially size up candidates. "That kind of early selection will happen anyway," says social psychologist Joseph Forgas, a professor at the University of New South Wales. "No company will spend hours interviewing every candidate so it is more a question of, is it better to be based on a five-minute chat or a curriculum vitae? If somebody makes a bad impression, the cost of selecting them 'out' is not as high as the cost of selecting them 'in'."

Still, Forgas says, those immediate impressions can be as wrong as they are instant. "The problem in all this – whether it is speed dating or networking or interviewing – is, you are trying to project people's behaviour in the future. It's not that easy." ●

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