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LOCAL NEWS, FOOD, ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## Real-life networking

### City groups attract young professionals

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If you're young, at least at heart, and you live at least somewhat close to Nashua, Manchester or Concord, there are organizations you can turn to for fun, professional development or to meet some new friends or colleagues. Each city has its own young professionals network: the Concord Young Professionals Network (CYPN), the Manchester Young Professionals Network (MYPN) and the Greater Nashua Young Professionals Network, which is called iUGO (pronounced you-go, and which means connect in Latin).

The groups try to connect with young professionals in similar ways. They have brown bag lunch gatherings with experts or business leaders. They get together for social networking events at local bars and restaurants. They offer expert panels where members can hear from and interact with area CEOs or community leaders. And they all have events that give participants a chance to try something new, such as a wine tasting or sushi tasting. None of the three groups charge an annual membership fee, though members are charged a fee for some events.

"At the highest level, it just opens all kinds of doors," said Karen Cooper, chairwoman of iUGO's board. iUGO celebrated its three-year anniversary last week. The group has a growing list of more than 1,200 members. "It presents opportunities you might not otherwise have. ... We feel that, when members are connected, if you're connected well personally, that leads to more job satisfaction."

Prior to becoming involved with iUGO (iugonashua.com), Cooper, who works at Rivier College, pretty much went home to Milford every night after work. After joining, she got to appreciate more of what greater Nashua has to offer. As a guideline, iUGO targets professionals ages 22 to 40, but it has a number of people older than 40 who are active. So "young at heart" is really the only criterion, Cooper said.

"I think you're happier at work when you feel you're part of a community," Cooper added.

With more than 2,000 members, the MYPN (www.mypn.org), which formed in 2004, is the largest young professionals network in the state, and E.J. Powers, vice-chairman of the MYPN board, said it has led the way for similar organi-

zations. Recently working with a client in Salem, Powers, who is vice president of strategic communications at Montagne Communications, said the client told him people are working on putting together a similar network in Salem.

"It's great to see other groups popping up and supporting the overall goal of attracting and retaining workers in New Hampshire," Powers said.

The different groups interact regularly.

"I think it makes every sense to share information, to use each other kind of as springboards to get to higher levels of quality," said Josh Robinson, a member of the CYPN (www.concordypn.org) steering committee.

Christopher Williams, for example, is president and CEO of the Greater Nashua Chamber of Commerce and a member of iUGO's steering committee. He was also the founding chairman of the MYPN and is co-chairman of the statewide "Stay. Work. Play." (www.stayworkplay.org) initiative.

"It has really blossomed into six different groups across the state," Williams said. "It's amazing what a germ of an idea can turn into."

The young professionals groups have been particularly important resources for people who didn't grow up in New Hampshire or who don't have an established core of colleagues and friends, Williams said. "It was a very unique thing that New Hampshire hadn't experienced until 2004," Williams said.

Each of the groups holds regular networking events at local restaurants and bars.

"Basically, the concept that we're working with is to ... reach out to those people in the demographic, 22 to 45, trying to engage people who work or live in Concord and make it clear to them that this perception that Concord is closed after 5 p.m. on weeknights is wrong," Robinson said. CYPN events sometimes draw more than 100 people. In September, the CYPN holds an event called Ignite, where as many as 20 people can take five minutes to show off some interesting, quirky or unique talent, such as skills with a Rubik's cube.

"Every time I go, I'm meeting many new people, new faces," Robinson said. "It tells me we have a very steady rotation of new interest ..."

CYPN, which launched in 2004, started slowly but has grown considerably. It has 1,600 members today. "Members" are people on the group's e-mail list. Robinson said initially there was a little resistance from the business community, which

didn't know what the group was all about.

"It took a little bit of time to open the eyes of some of the other businesses to the opportunities we were offering," Robinson said. "Initially, they didn't all recognize the value of the demographic."

The groups are not all about socializing. Many members of the CYPN are looking to get more professional development. In turn, the organization provides an enrichment series that is "geared more toward people who want substance, not to just have a drink, people who want to actually learn something," Robinson said.

CYPN recently began its own brown bag lunch series, in which groups or officials will make presentations. Main Street Concord was the first featured group; it gave a presentation on its effort to re-think downtown Concord. At a brown bag lunch event with MYPN last year, officials presented on extending commuter rail to Manchester.

MYPN has hosted local developer Dick Anagnost and Manchester Boston Regional Airport director Mark Brewer. Last year, MYPN hosted a panel discussion with some of the most successful women in the state, such as former attorney general Kelly Ayotte. "They provide guidance for our members, shed light on their path..." Powers said.

The mix of events is key because of the variety of professionals in the groups.

"If you come in with an open mind, sure, you might gain some professional development, you might build your professional network. You also can come wanting to have fun. If any of those things are accomplished, that's all the better," Cooper said.

CYPN is fighting back against the perception the group is a bunch of suit-and-tie-wearing business people. Robinson said there's always a place for suits and ties at meetings, but the organization wants anyone in a profession, teachers and plumbers along with bankers and lawyers.

Cooper said iUGO is growing and is becoming more efficient in the process of planning and coordinating events. She said events are becoming more and more creative and recently the group had its website redone and has begun to have a presence on social media platforms.

iUGO tries to create a welcoming atmosphere. Members of the steering committee are always on the lookout for new faces to make sure they're engaged and connecting. Cooper said that's key because many people do come alone.

The MYPN started as about a dozen people with an idea. Mike Skelton, chairman of the MYPN board, said all of the group's founders have since moved on from the board of directors.

"We have completely graduated into a new generation of MYPN leaders," Skelton said. "You do lose your institutional memory a little bit."

Skelton said MYPN is grounded in social networking, but it has expanded to become a place where people can gain professional development and enhance their careers.

The MYPN is run by an all-volunteer board and steering committee, and Skelton said the board will be unveiling some different events and programs that should garner sufficient funds to hire a paid staff member. MYPN would be the only young professionals network in the state to do that, if it comes to fruition, he said. A paid staffer would piece together the logistics of the operation while letting the board focus on the high-level strategic planning, Skelton said.

Setting itself apart from other groups, the MYPN runs the annual Start-up Challenge, a business plan competition whose winner gets \$25,000 to get the business rolling, along with in-kind guidance and resources. About 60 applicants sent their business plans in for the most recent competition.

All the groups support the state's "Stay. Work. Play." initiative. Williams said the initiative was born out of a University System of New Hampshire program designed to increase the percentage of college graduates who stay in New Hampshire to work. That mission is a little different from that of the young professionals networks, but the success of the initiative could depend partly on its ability to work with the networks.

In the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the number of young people in the state was decreasing, though that appeared to be due more to the birth rate than to a "brain drain," Williams said. Still, the state was falling behind many areas nationwide in getting young people to settle in the state. Today, the state is seeing progress in the 30-to-40 age bracket, but less in the 20-to-30 range. Nashua and Portsmouth benefit from their proximity to Boston, and Nashua from its high-tech manufacturing companies.

"I think it's all about providing experiences so they end up putting roots down in New Hampshire and feeling part of the community," Skelton said.