



Building Young Researcher Networks

Young European Associated Researchers



FORWARD

YEAR – The Young European Associated Researchers comprises of a number of Research and Technology organisations across Europe. We provide a platform for early career researchers to become more connected to their peers and provide them opportunities for learning a development.

Our experiences of forming young networks both on company internal, and international scale are summarized in this document. We describe our vision of the networks and summarise our experiences on how to set one up - and keep it running.

We hope you will find it useful,

Colm Mc Caffrey – Former-President of YEAR

Nicolaas van Strien – Former-Chairman of VTT Young Professionals, Board Member of YEAR

CONTENTS

FORWARD	1
1 NETWORKS AND COMMUNITIES	3
1.1 Why join an international Youth Community?.....	3
1.2 Targets, Goals, Resources	3
1.3 The Process.....	3
2 FIVE STEPS TO YOUNG RTO NETWORK.....	4
2.1 Top Down Kick-Off	4
2.2 Bottom Up Organisational Structure.....	4
2.3 Communication and Creating the Brand	4
2.4 Crystallising the Local Community.....	5
2.5 Expanding Nationally (After 6 Months To One Year)	5
3 FIVE STEPS TO INTERNATIONAL YOUNG NETWORK.....	6
3.1 IDENTIFY LOCAL LEADERS AND SET UP LOCAL NETWORK	6
3.2 KICK-OFF CAMP.....	7
3.3 START YOUNG INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OPERATIONS.....	8
3.4 THE FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE	9
3.5 THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY.....	10
4 EXAMPLE: VTT YOUNG PROFESSIONALS	11
4.1 OBJECTIVES.....	11
4.2 EVENTS	11
4.3 READY-MADE EVENT CONCEPTS FROM VTT-YP	12
4.4 HACKVTT – VTT YP IMPROVE ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICES	13
4.5 YOUNG EUROPEAN ASSOCIATED RESEARCHERS CONFERENCE	14

1 NETWORKS AND COMMUNITIES

In the modern world we simply cannot innovate in isolation. It is clear that technological progress accelerates as we become more connected and more open to each other. Open data, open access science and open innovation are all emerging to leverage the potential trapped in isolated silos of research and development. It is becoming clear that collaboration as opposed to competition paves the path to the future. As we open-up networks and communities become the very life blood of progress.

We all have a need to feel that we belong to a community, to a tribe. Within the tribe we feel safe which allows us to commit and feeds creativity. Building a network is all about creating a community.

A community is built of people with common needs in the present, or a common goal to strive towards in the future. It is solidified through shared experiences and learnings. Through journeys of success and failures, highs and lows. You cannot build a community by simply mandating and appointing a board. You can however foster its growth through encouragement, trust and resources.

1.1 Why join an international Youth Community?

This is the key question to be answered from the inception of the international community. There must be a common belief that resonates with each institute, and each person to want to participate in the community. It might be simply believing that *'together we are better'*, that we can stimulate and inspire and learn from our peers working in similar positions in very different environments.

1.2 Targets, Goals, Resources

Also critical to the formation of a youth network is the setting of achievable objectives and a goal. This will create the context of the formation of the network and guidance as to its resourcing. There must be an achievable goal, one which might not be feasible without the network. For example, a global 'grand challenge' like climate change.

1.3 The Process

1. Local networks
2. Connect the local networks to a global community

2 FIVE STEPS TO YOUNG RTO NETWORK

Successful networks are built around core groups of motivated people and on shared experiences. They cannot be established from top down. Here is our five-step protocol how to enable formation of a network from the bottom up.

2.1 Top Down Kick-Off

Have company CEO, or similar high-profile leader open the event. Emphasize that the top is motivated to facilitate the creation of the network and to commit resources, but emphasize formation from the bottom up. Plant the seed but don't dictate the growth.

Start with WHY. This is important. Highlight core beliefs and values. Open dialogue with attendees: what do they want the network to be? Let them take ownership of it.

Emphasize the fun and social aspects that will draw maximum crowd. The key objective of the kick-off is to create a buzz that something awesome is happening. Make people want to be a part of it.

2.2 Bottom Up Organisational Structure

Find one key motivated young professional to lead the network. This person is critical, they must be determined and have at least a 2 – 3 year plan. They must resonate with *WHY* and have a passion to create the network.

Form a board, minimum around 5 people (Chair, communications, finance, event managers etc.)

Give the board the responsibility and resources (work hours and operating costs) to organise events. Trust and autonomy are very important at this stage.

Draft a terms of reference document: rules of the game and use of resources. Have it agreed between management and network leaders.

After basic rules are agreed, hands off. Trust your board. Let them grow the organisation into what they want it to be

2.3 Communication and Creating the Brand

Refine beliefs, values and goals. Make sure the network beliefs resonate with values and needs of the people you want to attract. (See the example of VTT-YP.)

Draft achievable objectives and focus of the organisation.



Create communication material around your beliefs and objectives; flyers, linked in, twitter, facebook, website.

Select most efficient communication channels. At first, word of mouth is the key, but then event information needs to be readily accessible (facebook is better than mailing lists for this).

2.4 Crystallising the Local Community

Arrange a trip (2-3 days) of the core members of the local network. This could be a visit to exciting innovation companies, have some inspirational training and include fun and social aspects. (See the golden triangle.) The time together will solidify the core group and concrete the community.

Create lots of marketing material from this trip, solidify the tribe and amplify the buzz around the network.

Engage with human resources to mentor and recruit new employees into the organisation. It is much easier to engage new employees than change the habits of old ones.

2.5 Expanding Nationally (After 6 Months to One Year)

Visit other RTO locations and have kick-off meetings. This time the core members of the central network are introducing the concept, showing examples of past events with a message of support from the management.

Again, at kick-off emphasize the fun and social aspects, gather maximum crowd and create the buzz.

Appoint two location ambassadors and provide them with resources to organise local events.

Assemble all local networks at central location for first annual event (overnight event).

3 FIVE STEPS TO INTERNATIONAL YOUNG NETWORK

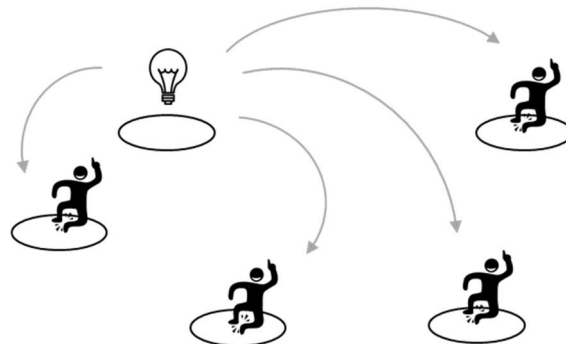
We believe that the biggest challenges in creating an international network are the geographical distance and finding common values. Creating a vibrant community takes time, but it can be done in few years from the decision to make it happen and launching the idea. In addition, the availability of resources is critical in the inception and it is so far unclear how this kind of network can be funded.

3.1 IDENTIFY LOCAL LEADERS AND SET UP LOCAL NETWORK

Time point: 0-2 months from the launch.

A global tribe is built of local tribes.

Establish the local network. (See the *Five steps to Young RTO Network*.) Arrange teleconferences between e.g. VTT Young Professionals and local leaders of the networks for ideas, advice and support.



3.2 KICK-OFF CAMP

Time point: 6 months to 1 year from the launch.

Personal relations are the foundation of a community.

Gather all the fresh local leaders to Finland for 3 to 4 day kick-off work shop (see HackVTT) to exchange experiences and insights on running the local networks and to visit the events of the hosting network. This will bring the fresh networks to full speed. Time spent together will galvanise the group of active leaders of the global network. Shared experience of the kick-off camp will fuel collaboration and communication in the future.

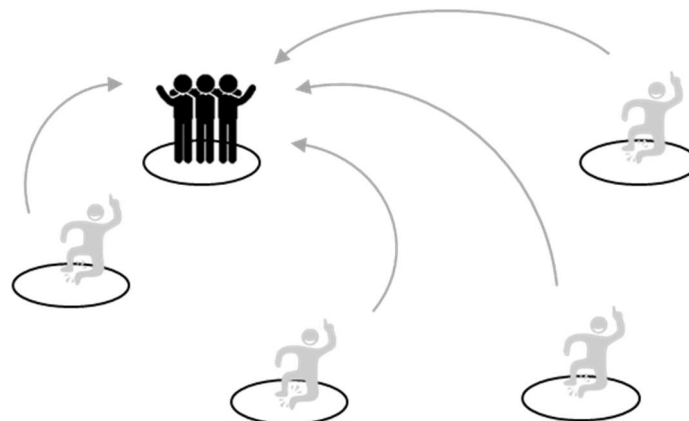
The Young International Network will be drafted and established. The core values, the *WHY*, will have to resonate with those of local networks. This is important. A community can form only around a shared goal and values.

Ideally the Kick-off Camp should be arranged together with the YEAR conference (see Young European Associated Researchers Conference). This would build a good framework to start drafting the first annual conference (step 4).

Challenges:

- Funding. Costs for travel and arrangements are not insignificant.
- No attendance. Identifying the motivated local leaders is essential.
- Overcoming cultural differences. What works for us, may not work for you. We need to find the common ways. For this, common understanding of the goal, and *WHY*, is important.

CHECK POINT: This is the point to decide whether resources are made available and a global network will be created. If not, the established local networks will continue as they are.



3.3 START YOUNG INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OPERATIONS

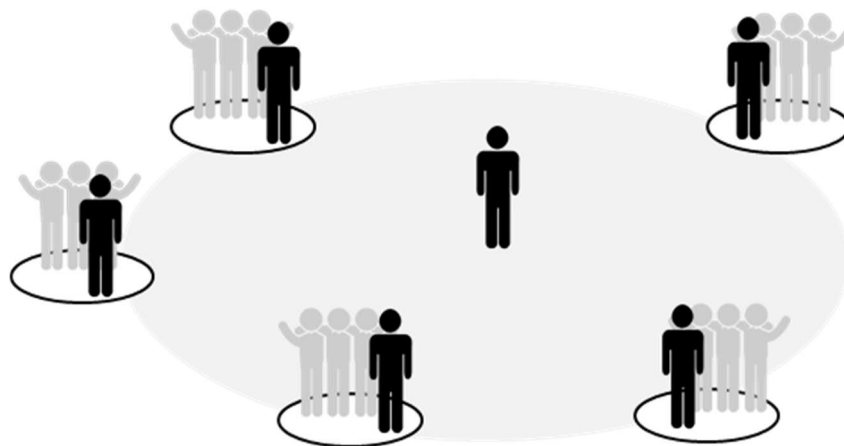
Time point: Immediately after the kick-off camp.

The organisation requires a secretary with working hours dedicated to running communications and operations of the Young International Network. A board will be selected including all member networks. Efficient communications among the board is the crucial. Facilitating this in a sensible way is key. We have learned that long email chains are not effective

The two main goals of the first year of operation are 1) to support establishment of local networks and 2) to organise the first annual conference.

Challenges:

- Funding. Running a global network requires a lot of effort. Resources should be available (from where?) to employ part time (20%) board members (chair).
- Geographical distance. In addition to the shared experience of the kick-off camp, common commitment and goals are essential.



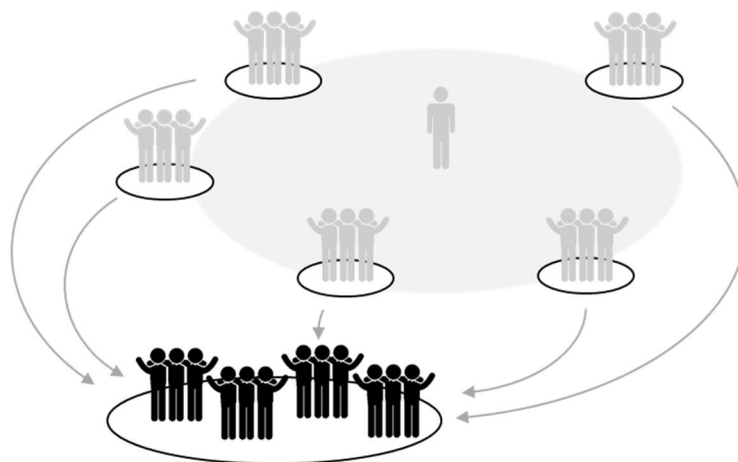
3.4 THE FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Time point: earliest 2 years after the launch, 1 year after starting operations of the Young International Network.

The first annual conference will solidify the global community. The annual conference will focus on tackling the grand problems of the world through inclusive technological innovation. It will be a memorable experience and a highlight of the early career.

Challenges:

- Funding. This is expensive. In the future, part of the costs may be covered by sponsors or partners. But first there needs to be a proof of concept to attract external funding.
- Low attendance. In our experience, international events require large enough delegates to build momentum. Active local networks are crucial for this.
- Attractiveness. If it ain't fun, no one will come. Attending the conference needs to be the greatest thing there is. It needs to be an inspiring and fun experience. Attractive speakers, opportunities for personal and career development and good social program are necessities.



3.5 THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

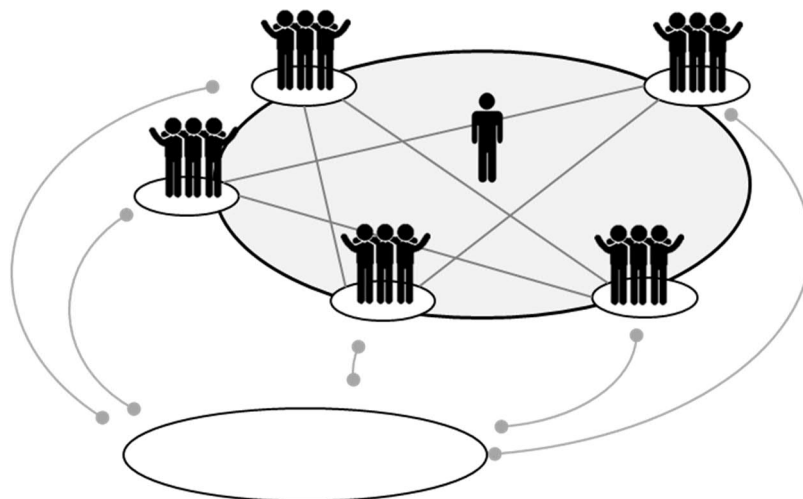
Time point: after the first annual conference.

Once the global network has been established and a number of people have met each other, tools for communication within the global tribe become important. A web page and active social media engagement will keep the global network connected and built a sense of community. The community will exchange experiences of local events, share ideas and success stories as well provide a platform for further networking. Managing communications takes a lot of effort. This will be the main duty of the secretary.

At this point, smaller actions can take place. Researcher exchange and topic-specific seminars can be organised between two or more local networks.

Challenges:

- Continuity. The network is driven by the young and enthusiastic and the turnover is quick. New leaders, new board and a new chair need to be in training continuously.



4 EXAMPLE: VTT YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

VTT Young Professionals is a community of the active and enthusiastic. We support, inspire and learn from each other. We build national and international networks, combining diverse talents and passions, to address grand challenges. We empower aspiring game changers.

4.1 OBJECTIVES

- Creating a community, a network of peer support
- Enhancing motivation, creativity and productivity by organising stimulating and interactive events
- Cross disciplinary networking, internally, with partner companies and internationally, brainstorming ideas and building future collaborations. 'Breakthroughs occur at disciplinary boundaries'
- Provide a voice for the young professional community and a channel to management to influence positive change



COMMUNITY



TRAINING



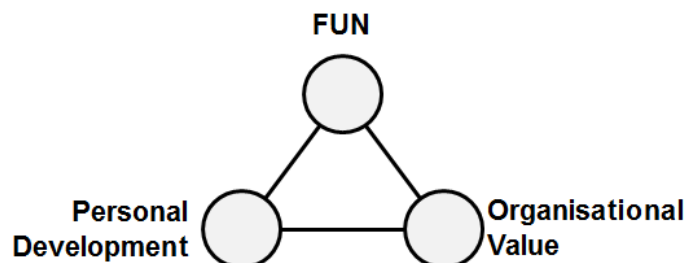
WELLBEING



VOICE

4.2 EVENTS

VTT YP's main functions are events designed on basis of the Golden Triangle. An ideal event combines fun with value to VTT as an organisation and to the attendees as young professionals.



GOLDEN TRIANGLE

Formula for successful events

4.3 READY-MADE EVENT CONCEPTS FROM VTT-YP

Event		
Personal Value	Company Value	Fun Activity
Summer Day Gathers all national networks in main location		
Training in selected topic which is advantageous to both employee and company (e.g. pitching)	Employees are better able to communicate with customers and partners	Fun and competitive team activity, BBQ and sauna
Induction Day Brings together and welcomes all new employees/trainees		
Learning more about the company and making friends in different fields	Employees have better knowledge and the people, services and opportunities in the company	Evening event including socialising, networking and dinner
LabCrawl A visit and tour of different lab / facilities in the company		
Expanding knowledge about the capabilities of the company	New employees can better exploit the multidisciplinary nature of the company	Music or cultural event, including dinner and refreshments
Career Development Organising of career boosting workshops and trainings		
Knowledge of the different career paths and opportunities available in the company	Obtaining an orientation for career path, concrete goals or positions to reach for	Sporting activity such as climbing, nature walking, football
Company Hackathon Gets the young employees to Hack / improve operational processes		
Exciting opportunity to propose, pilot and implement better working methods	Innovative ideas from the bottom up, along with people with the motivation to see them through	2-3 days overnighting at a stimulating location, giving time and flexibility to brainstorm and discuss offline

4.4 HACKVTT – VTT YP IMPROVE ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICES

The HackVTT event, held in Nuuksio forest from 20 to 22 May, gathered together 14 enthusiastic VTT employees to throw ideas around for the organisation's future. The rules of thumb for the weekend included that VTT would only be referred to in the past tense, sanctions would be imposed on any needless complaining, and the brainstorming would begin from scratch. Antti Vasara, VTT's President & CEO, also visited the venue.

It all began with a somewhat Utopian idea: What if VTT did not exist? What would a future research institute look like and how would people work there? Members of the VTT Young Professionals network decided to arrange a joint brainstorming event around this theme.

"The initial idea was to take along a case of beer and some boxes of pizza and head to the woods for the weekend with a few people," says Lauri Reuter, Research Scientist, member of the VTT Young Professionals network, and one of the hosts of the event.

However, the idea of a joint session attracted so much interest that the nature of the event was adjusted to a more official direction. In addition to President & CEO Antti Vasara, communications specialists, representatives of the business world and VTT's experts were invited as well.

"We wanted to reap all the benefits we could from the weekend, and turn our ideas into concrete proposals. We got a couple of professionals from Kaskas Media to train us in pitching, so that, in the future, we would be able to present our ideas in an even more convincing manner," says Reuter. Ideas were introduced to VTT Strategy team

No specific themes were specified in advance, so all brainstorming had to start from scratch. If any of the participants were caught complaining for nothing, they had to drop few coins to a "penalty box". "We did collect a few euros at the beginning", Reuter says with a smile.

Three groups were formed of the 14 participants, and two prevailing themes emerged in the actual debates: the ways of working and communication at VTT. These themes were further refined into concrete proposals, resulting into three pitches, which were presented to VTT's strategy group.

"We will set out to implement our ideas one step at a time. Testing them does not require complicated organisational changes or major resources," Reuter notes. "Of course we hope that our ideas would find some kind of concrete form also at the top level of management."



4.5 YOUNG EUROPEAN ASSOCIATED RESEARCHERS CONFERENCE

The third Annual Conference, organised by YEAR, was hosted by VTT Young Professionals on 11-12 May in Innopoli. It offered training and international networking opportunities for young researchers from 12 research institutes and universities all over Europe. The focus of the Annual Conference was how to integrate Open Science in European Projects. The event was co-funded by the FOSTER EU Project.

On the first day seminars and trainings took place in order to provide the attendees with good background information as well as tips for publishing Open Access, Open Research Data, and for getting recognition for their Open Science work. On the second day the workshop on open project ideas took place. 15 young researchers submitted their innovative research project ideas prior to the conference to get a chance to win one of the two YEAR Awards consisting of a European Project Management training course and 5000 Euro each to further develop the project ideas.

In the workshop, the first selection of project ideas was done by workshop participants, where they voted for projects that inspired them to join the team. Five ideas with the highest interest went into the second round and were elaborated further in teams. The achieved team work was presented in a final pitch presentations and the jury selected the two most outstanding ideas. The jury members emphasized the originality and quality of all submitted project ideas. This year's YEAR Awards went to Helena Henno (VTT) and her idea Fluvio – a Smartphone-based Solution for Preventing Epidemics and Oliver Zendel (AIT) and his idea Towards an Open Peer-Review Process.

Prior to the conference, VTT Young Professional had the opportunity to act as ambassadors to Finland. A social weekend, gathered a large number of participants who had the chance on Saturday to discover Helsinki from every angle and on Sunday, a typical Finnish summer evening, barbecue and sauna by the sea, concluded the programme.



4.6 Gala of Failures – An event to celebrate the fails and learnings taken from those

The Gala of Failures, an event held for the 4th year in a row and created by the VTT Young Professionals was held on the 27th of January in Trap Factory. The event offered a stage for anyone at VTT who was willing to share a story of failing and learning from it - all of that in front of an audience and with a laugh.

The idea was born during one of VTT's hackathons in 2017: "We got the idea to challenge different aspects – and instead of shame and blame start to celebrate failures, because in the end they may be the remarkable moments that teach us a lot", says Nicolaas van Strien, Research Scientist and Chairman of the VTT Young Professionals and man behind the idea. "We wanted to encourage people to talk more openly about their failures, share their experiences and even be proud of what they have learned thanks to failing"

The Gala event was divided into 2 sections: invited speakers from higher management and the second consisted of VTTers who would participate as nominees for the 'Fail of the Year' award. These VTTers from all levels, told their personal stories about failing. Among them were e.g. (Senior) Scientists, Team Leaders, Executive Vice-Presidents, Key Account Managers and VTT's President & CEO.

"The Gala of Failures is an event to promote our failures and to remind us that it's okay to make mistakes, but what matters most is how we choose to learn from them", says van Strien. All speakers were given a short time to tell their story, with the help of a few slides if wanted, and shared the biggest learnings taken from the incidents. Those who were nominees and participating to win the 'Fail of the Year' award, their stories came to a vote for the audience and the winner was chosen by the people's choice. A Runner-up and 'Best invited speaker' were chosen by the organising team.

To make the event at its best, inspiration was done from the Oscars in Hollywood. A carefully selected comedian was asked to host the event, everyone was dressed up in gala attire, drinks and snacks were served and inhouse trophies were 3D-printed and handed out to all the winners. The evening was then continued with a party where a live band was performing until the late hours.



The logo for 'Year' features a stylized white swoosh that curves around the letter 'Y'. The word 'Year' is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font to the right of the swoosh.