

2017 ANS ANNUAL MEETING

Transitioning to the workforce

ANS's Young Members Group sponsored a session at which attendees had the opportunity to learn from the experiences of a panel of young professionals.

At the 2017 ANS Annual Meeting in June, a panel session sponsored by the Young Members Group and organized and chaired by Brett Rampal, of NuScale Power, centered on how to succeed when transitioning from the university setting to the working world. In addition to Rampal, the speakers included Rian Bahran, of Los Alamos National Laboratory; Harsh Desai, of the Nuclear Energy Institute; and Kathryn Huff, of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The panelists offered a wide range of experiences and paths to successful careers, and the audience members had an opportunity to ask questions about transitioning into almost any sector available to nuclear engineers.

Huff spoke about her experience during her first year as an assistant professor in the Department of Nuclear, Plasma, and



Huff

Radiological Engineering at U of I. She said that by the time she completed her doctoral degree in nuclear engineering at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, she knew she wanted to be a professor because she enjoyed interacting with students, although she also had a number of positive experiences as a graduate researcher at Argonne National Laboratory and as a postdoc at the University of California at Berkeley. Huff said that the prospects for entering academia

in nuclear engineering are bright, and that although the path to a career in academia is fairly straightforward, the specifics can be tricky.

Desai spoke next about his transition from North Carolina State University,



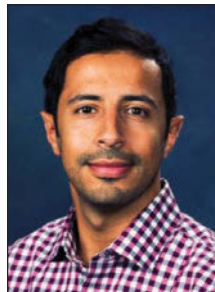
Desai

where he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in nuclear engineering, to the workforce. He joined GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy in 2008, and in 2011, he took a position with Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory near Schenectady, N.Y. "I thought I was going to go the technical route, and multiphysics at that time was really burgeoning," he said. "I worked at KAPL for three-and-a-half years and then decided to take a left turn and join the policy arena." He applied and was selected for the 2014 ANS Congressional Fellowship, serving his fellowship year in the Washington, D.C., office of Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D., Calif.). After the fellowship, he returned to KAPL for a year as a strategy consultant and policy advisor before being recruited by the Department of Energy as a technology-to-market advisor. The week of the annual meeting, Desai accepted a position as manager of energy and economic analyses at the Nuclear Energy Institute.

Bahran spoke next about the path he took to his current position as a research and development staff member at LANL,

beginning with earning bachelor's and doctoral degrees at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He knew early on that he wanted to work in global security programs, particularly at LANL because of its role as a National Nuclear Security Administration weapons laboratory. He joined LANL in 2013 as a postdoc.

Bahran divided his experience into three sections: networking as an undergraduate; figuring out how to choose a job;



Bahran

and learning how to focus on what is important in a career. "Networking early is important, but think about quality rather than quantity," he said. In terms of choosing a job, Bahran said that he heard a lot about applying for jobs but not enough about how to choose a job. "To me, there are five things to consider when looking for a job: salary, location, day-to-day responsibilities, management, and upward mobility," he said. "It has to be very personal when you are weighing those five things. When you're looking at career options, it's hard to figure out if your priorities will change in a couple of years and how to assess some of these, like the day-to-day or the geography."

Bahran emphasized the importance of building habits that will help lead to success. "One good piece of advice I learned from Katy [Huff] is that she goes to a meeting only if there are good people or an agenda," he said. "It's a good habit to have if you're a busy person. As you get busier, try to focus on what you want to spend your time on in the workplace." He also noted that delayed gratification is something with which this generation, including himself, struggles. "If you say yes to something, you're saying no to something else," Bahran said. "Don't do it because it sounds good now, but really think about what you're letting go if you're already maxed out before taking something new onto your plate."

Bahran closed with the reminder of trusting one's gut instinct and, while asking others for advice is recommended, an individual should be able to control his or her agenda and career goals. "Think about what you want to do, how to start populating it from what is already on your to-do list, and how to get rid of other things," he said.

Rampal, a core designer at NuScale and chair of the ANS Young Members Group, received bachelor's and master's degrees in nuclear engineering from the University of Florida. In 2009, he joined Westinghouse Electric Company in Charlotte, N.C., where he worked for five years before

taking a position at NuScale Power. "My career took a bit of a different path than my colleagues' here," Rampal said. "My



Rampal

career was very reactive and responsive. Outside factors drove many of the choices and decisions I made and pushed me into new opportunities and things I hadn't even considered. During college, I wasn't interested in anything I currently do and excel at in my job." He spoke of the need to sometimes step out of one's comfort zone in order to grow and progress in one's career.

The majority of the session was driven by audience questions about the panelists' specific experience, as well as general questions about moving into the workforce as a young professional. Networking came up numerous times, with the panelists holding different beliefs and habits when it comes to that practice. Bahran reiterated that he does build his LinkedIn connections list but considers only a few to be close relationships. "To me, LinkedIn is a repository of business cards that updates itself," he said. "There is value there, but retrospectively, only a small fraction of those people really did help me."

Desai added, "The whole purpose of LinkedIn is professional networking; it's not to make best friends. I use them as buckets. When it comes to policy, I know there is a bucket of 200 people that I can rely on. And when people send me a message, I can quickly look to see what connections we have in common, because I'm not inclined to give my time and real thoughts to someone I don't know or have a connection to."

Like Desai, Rampal utilizes as many connections as possible. "I value quantity over quality," he said. "You have to view yourself as a brand, and the only way to advance your brand is to get it out there." Huff noted that in her experience, LinkedIn is not often utilized by professors.

Other topics that were addressed included having an "elevator pitch" ready to go, how to network with those in one's company who rank above his or her managers, how to ask someone to be a mentor, and how to make friends when beginning a job at a company without colleagues in the same age range. On the latter point, the panelists noted that even though colleagues who may be older are not always viewed as someone a young professional would typically go to for friendship, those are often people with whom they form great working relationships and friendships. Desai mentioned the importance in those situations of leveraging a person's

network and reaching out to acquaintances of one's LinkedIn connections.

Rampal pointed out the necessity of including an objective on one's resume in order to answer the question, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" Desai added that it is necessary to figure out what one's brand is. "If I can't explain who I am or what I want in 30 seconds," he said, "I just lost that person who might have given me an opportunity."

Throughout the session, the main points remained the same: Each person's career takes a different trajectory, connections and mentors are key, and it is always important to know what one's values are and what he or she hopes to get from a job or career.—Kaitlin Schuler

For additional coverage of the ANS Annual Meeting, see the report that begins on page 96.