

► **DirectTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR



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Connectivity Is Power

It's a question that floats to the surface with the consistency of foam on draft beer, "Hey, do you know someone...?" On my smartphone. Over speaker phone. In the subway. On the tram. Riding the bus. During an Uber ride. Via e-mail. On FaceTime. In a shared shuttle van. At conferences. Via text. After lectures. On the plane. In the train. "Can you recommend someone for this position?" or, "I just graduated, can you introduce me to anyone in...?"

Last week our Government Affairs team met with Washington, DC, Capitol Hill staffers involved in the U.S. congressional Appropriations Committees. The entire conversation centered on *who* might be convinced to support language helpful to our profession. Indeed, it's the *who*, not the *what*, that constitutes the largest fraction of my daily routine.

Ironically, we spend most of our days identifying evidence and drafting plans to advance our work. I'm struck by the notion that investments on the *who* might represent a more productive use of time. Give me access to the right *who* and together we can tackle almost any *what*.

To complicate matters, the world around us is changing at a terrifying velocity. The actors enter and depart the stage with great rapidity. To illustrate my point, I pointed out at a recent staff meeting how Airbnb and Lyft have disrupted the hotel and taxi industry, respectively. Don't long distance charges on the phone bill seem like an archaic concept? My adult children wouldn't recognize a rotary phone if they saw one at a local antique store.

Explosive percolation: a sudden emergence of large-scale connectivity.

As I write this column, the new U.S. president has just been sworn in and 30 minutes later, the White House climate change Web site disappeared. Message received. So, is there any merit in attempting to keep up with an ever-maddening world? In fact, I don't think we have to and believe there is a work around. Allow me to explain.

Our profession and association's future is predicated on us to be wise stewards of the resources that are under *our* control. There are approximately 95,000 nonprofits in the U.S. Instead of racing to keep up with them, let's maximize the assets we possess. We have four resources that in aggregate make many other nonprofits jealous. The four are our: 1) *Journal of Environmental Health*, 2) Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition, 3) policy issues that keep us up at night, and 4) credentials. If we optimize the synergies among these portfolios, and create and deliver value in the process, our future is bright.

What will assure our success? The creation of an internal NEHA community that

consults, coordinates, and collaborates. What does that look like in practice? An environment where the board of directors, technical advisors, staff, and members rally around optimization of our four major assets. The limitations to our potential are human, not fiscal or technical.

Of course, owning the best technology and having a hefty bank account removes the edge off any major endeavor. Nonetheless, the only thing really stopping us is us. It is a shared vision, cooperation, and trust that are the accelerants in the modern world. Analogous to internal portfolios, we also urgently need to identify and master external portfolios. What does that mean? Networks. There are many professional playing fields where our presence and energy will expand our influence. What does that look like? Glad you inquired.

We've been cultivating our association's professional network to ensure there are no bottlenecks to impede potential opportunities for you and your career. I tender three current illustrations in evidence.

1. The U.S. is rapidly becoming urbanized.

To that end, we have accepted an invitation to participate in the CityHealth initiative. This project, funded by the de Beaumont Foundation, represents an alliance of the 40 largest city health departments in the U.S. The aim is to support policies and practices that give rise to healthy living conditions in communities with a large urban core. Our role will be to

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- promote retail food safety. Learn more at www.cityhealth.org.
2. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 535,000 U.S. children under the age of six have elevated blood lead levels. Approximately 23 million older homes contain lead paint. The American Water Works Association estimates that there are 6.1 million lead service lines affecting up to 10 million homes. We have been invited and have agreed to provide leadership to the Green & Healthy Homes Initiative call to action to end lead poisoning in the U.S. by 2022. Our role will be to provide tools and resources in support of local efforts to eliminate lead exposure, as well as partner with national associations in Washington, DC, to achieve the same.
 3. Our association and profession have been historically absent from many circles where critical and influential discussions and decisions have been made that affect the profession. I have accepted an invitation to participate in a National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine panel on environmental health in spring 2017. This environmental health initiative planning meeting has about a dozen participants from the National Institutes



NEHA establishes a connection with Jack Herrmann, deputy director, Office of Policy and Planning within the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response. Photo courtesy of Joanne Zurcher.

of Health, CDC, Johns Hopkins University, and now, NEHA.

While none of the activities described above is a game changer per se, they do illustrate how we are connecting to the world around us in a more deliberate and convincing manner. I'm trying to create a NEHA version of explosive percolation: a sudden emergence of large-scale connectivity. If successful, I believe the dividends for you and your work will be profound. Each of us has a role, and the cost is largely a change in attitude—to our work, our communities, and ourselves. In other words, the only thing stopping us is us.

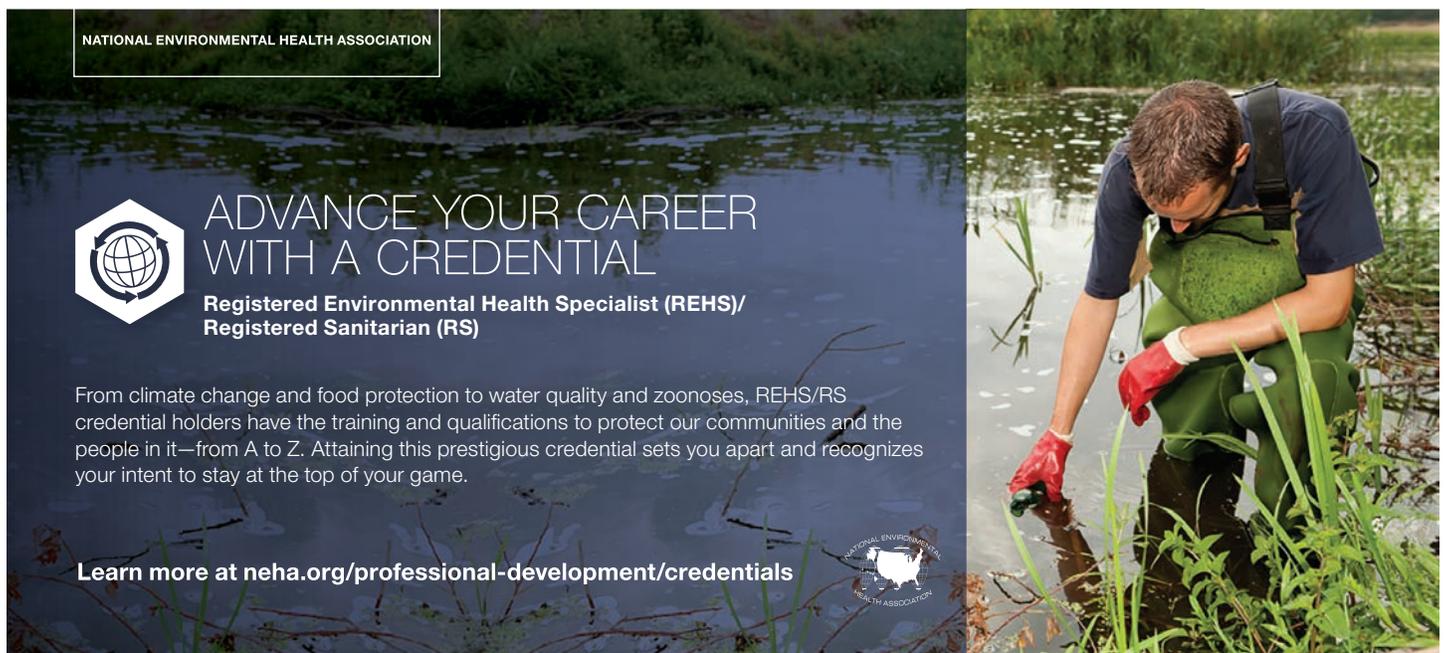
I read somewhere recently that history only has the power you give it. What we have learned from recent political history is that a good ground game requires connections. Twitter connections. Facebook connections. Influence connections. Political connections. Academic connections. The well informed and well connected are sought after in the current age of information and data. We could be the ones sought after.

I close by sharing with you how this new approach looks in practice. Let's take the AEC. Our 2017 AEC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, will showcase efforts at connectivity: nationally-elected officials, the Public Health Accreditation Board, the clinical professions, big cities, the National Restaurant Association, the antibiotic-resistance community, sustainability professionals, the philanthropy industry, environmental health leadership sessions, and the industry representing the largest legal cash crop in the U.S. These sessions, in addition to the ones you customarily expect, will allow you to connect to a larger world of environmental health. Join us in person, or in spirit. The decision to connect is entirely under your control.

It's time to color outside the lines. Sharpen those Crayolas. 🐷

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