Belgium: It’s not just for waffles anymore. It’s for networking too! As many of you surely know, I-O psychology has been thriving in Belgium for quite some time, much to the benefit of our profession. Through effective networking, new knowledge is regularly transmitted within and across the Belgian borders, thereby supporting collaboration and innovation within our field. In this column, Frederik Anseel and Filip Lievens provide an excellent overview of the strategies our Belgian colleagues use to stay connected to I-O psychology and each other.

From Six to One Degree of Separation (and Back):
I-O Psychology in Belgium

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Most of you will be familiar with the six degrees of separation hypothesis (or may have seen the movie with the same title starring Will Smith). According to this hypothesis, anyone in the world can be connected to any other person through a chain of acquaintances with no more than five intermediaries. Each of us knows someone, who knows someone, who knows someone and in the end, in some mysterious way, we are all connected to the President, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Brad Pitt, or Angelina Jolie (you sure wished that was true, don’t you!). In light of this hypothesis, networking could be seen as a strategy to get to know as many people as possible to bring down the number of needed intermediaries for contacting other key players in your business from five to four to three to two to one.

When we were asked to tell SIOP members something about networking opportunities for Belgian I-O psychologists, we first were a bit speechless…networking in Belgium…what do you mean? Belgium is a small country (12,565 square miles, which is something like the state of Massachusetts, with about 10,400,000 inhabitants) with a small number (six) of I-O departments (two to four faculty) and thus, also a pretty small community of I-O psychologists. If we were talking in terms of degrees of separation, it would

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1 As always, your comments and suggestions regarding this column are most welcome. Please feel free to e-mail me: lfthompson@ncsu.edu.
be safe to say that one degree of separation would be sufficient to contact any I-O psychologist in Belgium. Of course, there are a number of interesting networking and professional development opportunities in Belgium, but given that we are such a small community, a large part of our networking is aimed at getting in touch with a more international audience (where we are much like anyone else again confronted with the six degrees of separation).

As we like doing field research, especially if it involves us attending champagne receptions, for your interest we have joined in on a couple of typical network and professional development activities in Belgium in the past few months. On the basis of these experiences, this is what you should know about networking for I-O psychologists in Belgium (without going into much detail about the wise lesson learned about never mixing champagne and beer).

A first place where I-O psychologists meet is at the Annual Meeting of the Belgian Association of Psychological Sciences (BAPS—http://www.baps.be/). The BAPS (originally called the Belgian Psychological Society) was founded in 1946. Its purpose was to bring together all persons living in Belgium who are interested in the scientific development of psychology and its applications. The goal of the BAPS has largely remained the same throughout its history: to promote scientific research in all domains of psychology, including fundamental fields such as mathematical and cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, and the cognitive neurosciences. At the same time, BAPS seeks to promote research and integration into more applied fields such as clinical, developmental, work and organizational, and social psychology. Although historically a strong emphasis has been put on fundamental research at the annual meetings, in recent years the number of presentations from I-O psychologists has increased. For instance, last year Frederik Anseel and Johnny Fontaine of Ghent University organized a symposium on academic I-O psychology in Belgium with contributions from all six Belgian universities that are conducting I-O psychology research. This was a unique event as we had presenters from both the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parts of Belgium. You may know that Belgium is a federal country consisting of three regions (Flanders region, Walloon region, and the Brussels region), mainly speaking Dutch (Flanders and parts of Brussels) or French (Walloon region and parts of Brussels). Traditionally, research activities of Dutch- and French-speaking scholars have been somewhat isolated with French-speaking researchers being a bit more oriented towards their colleagues in France. So, this symposium was a great opportunity to tighten our ties with our French-speaking colleagues and to start national research collaborations. We had a very diverse set of topics, ranging from “inter-organizational collaboration” to “gender differences in health and well-being at work” to “development practices for high potentials in Belgium.” In addition, we were very happy to have Michael Harris as a keynote speaker in this symposium.
A second opportunity to network for I-O psychologists is attending brown-bag talks at the various I-O departments in Belgium. This is an example of activities where our focus is to a large extent directed towards an international community. Given the rather narrow community of Belgian I-O psychologists, well-known international scholars are often invited to give a talk. For instance, in recent years Michael Harris, Don Vandewalle, Dan Turban, and Avi Kluger have visited the I-O department at Ghent University. In Belgium, it is also a tradition to invite international researchers as members of the examining board for public PhD dissertation defenses. At these defenses, about 50 individuals are typically present, consisting of family (Hi mam!), friends (Hi honey!), colleagues (Hi guys!), students (See what I can!), some I-O practitioners who have collaborated in collecting field data (Thanks for saving my ***!), and of course an examination board composed of “home-grown” and international researchers (Please, don’t make me look ridiculous!). We try to combine a number of activities so that international visitors can be present at a public defense and also give a talk to our department, conduct a workshop, or informally talk to graduate students and faculty (and, of course, still save time for sightseeing in the old cities of Ghent, Brugges, Brussels, and the Belgian coast. In fact, in the last years, Frederik Anseel has refined his tour guiding skills so that a visit to all these places can be done in one breathtaking day).

Given the international focus of the Belgian I-O community, we find it especially important to be present and take part in international conferences such as the annual SIOP conference, the biannual meeting of the Europe Association for Work and Organizational psychology (EAWOP), the International Congress of Applied Psychology, and the International Congress of Psychology. In addition, both graduate students and faculty are encouraged to conduct research stays in Europe and overseas to connect and network with foreign I-O psychologists and communities. In fact, there exist quite a few funding opportunities in Belgium that enable international research stays or provide funding for international researchers to stay in Belgium for a while (e.g., Fund for Scientific Research Flanders [FWO], Belgian American Educational Foundation [BAEF], and the Fulbright exchange program). Using some of these grants Filip Lievens, for instance, has spent several months at Bowling Green State University, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Missouri (St. Louis).

Due to its geographical position and native language, a large part of networking activities of Flemish researchers in Belgium is directed towards the Netherlands. For instance, Dutch researchers are often invited onto dissertation committees of Belgian graduates in I-O psychology. In recent years, Nico Van Yperen, Edwin Van Hooft, Annelies Van Viaenen, Karen Van Oudenhoven-Van Der Zee have been part of dissertation committees at Ghent University. Another nice example of these “bi-country” networking activities
is the “First Dutch-Flemish meeting on personnel selection and recruitment” organized by Marise Born and Rob Meijer. The goal of these meetings is to bring researchers from the Netherlands and Flanders together to stimulate research in recruitment, selection, and assessment. The first meeting took place in October at the University of Twente, where both graduate students and senior faculty presented their newest studies and research in progress on selection and recruitment. In the future, these annual meetings will also be held at the Erasmus University Rotterdam and Ghent University.

Attentive readers may have noticed that so far the activities that have been mentioned have been merely directed towards academics. This is correct. Although we strongly value, as true I-O psychologists, the scientist–practitioner model, we have to admit that the link with I-O practitioners in Belgium is not always as strong as we would like it to be. There have been a number of attempts to bridge the divide between academics and practitioners in I-O psychology, but they have not always been as successful as one might hope for. Whereas the annual SIOP conference receives a lot of attention from practitioners, no I-O practitioners are typically present at the annual BAPS meetings. However, there are some occasions where academics and practitioners seem to blend well. First, in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, we have the Flemish Association for Work, Organizational, and Consumer Psychologists (called VOCAP in Dutch—http://www.vocap.be). VOCAP was originally founded by academics to bring together all psychologists that were concerned with psychology issues in organizations. The association currently has about 180 members and organizes monthly meetings where both practitioners and academics address issues of interest (e.g., HRD as a business partner, teamwork, emotional intelligence, “flow” at work, etc.). Generally, 30 participants show up at each meeting, mostly consisting of practitioners. Recently, the business school of Ghent University (VLGMS) has initiated a new yearly meeting, the HR day (“HR practitioners meet HR academy”), presenting both academic and practitioner speakers on concurrent topics. This new initiative has attracted an increasingly growing public and is now probably one of the main networking events for HR professionals in Belgium. A number of keynote speakers at this meeting are well-known SIOP members such as Denise Rousseau, Frank Landy, Filip De Fruyt, and Filip Lievens.

In closing, it is safe to say that “one degree of separation” networking in Belgium is rather limited because of the small community. We invest a lot of time and money in “six degrees of separation” networking to become part of the larger international I-O community. Having said this, researchers who are interested in paying a visit to our department (and enjoy our guided tours along the way!) can drop us a note at frederik.anseel@ugent.be.
Concluding Editorial

So, there you have it—everything you need to know the next time your best friend (whose step-brother-in-law’s former babysitter used to date a waiter who once served pickled herring to a guy who sat next to Brad Pitt on the school bus in the second grade) asks you how I-O psychologists in Belgium network with like-minded others. Though networking is never without its challenges, our Belgian colleagues have found a way to capitalize on their excellent location while staying connected to the wider I-O community operating beyond the country’s borders. Hopefully, this article will serve to reduce the number of “degrees of separation” between us SIOP members and our international colleagues by broadening readers’ perspectives on I-O psychology as it continues to evolve across the globe.

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