

A smarter way to network

By Rob Cross, Robert Thomas, Harvard Business Review, July-August 2011

Who we know often matters more than what we know. Networking plays an important role in career success. What is important is not the size of the network but its quality and diversity.

Getting it wrong

There are some common mistakes made while networking.

- One is to build imbalanced networks.
- A second is to pursue the wrong kinds of relationships.
- And a third is to make ineffective use of the relationships.

More specifically, people get networking wrong in the following ways:

- Focusing too heavily on the company's official hierarchy and missing out on the opportunities to develop informal connections.
- Spending so much time on networking as to burn ourselves out.
- Remaining connected with people who keep us focused on our existing competencies instead of people who can make us try out something new.
- Becoming friendly with people who are very similar to us.
- Superficially networking with a large number of people.
- Aligning our interests and values with those of others, trying to please everybody and ending up pleasing no one.

Getting it right

While building a network, it is important to strike a balance between connections that promote career advancement and those that promote engagement and satisfaction.

Effective core networks are quite small, typically ranging from 12 to 18 people. The connections of the network must cut across different groups and hierarchical, functional, and geographic lines. The network should help us to learn, take better decisions, help us to grow personally and professionally and find work life balance. We should target people with a positive attitude. If people in our network are enthusiastic, authentic and generous, their behaviours will quickly rub off on us.

In general, a well-functioning network should connect us with people:

- With valuable information and expertise.
- With the power and influence to be our mentor, sponsor and who can provide us political support.
- Who can give us valuable feedback and help us to improve.
- Who can provide personal support when things are not going well.
- Who can help us find meaning and a sense of purpose in the work we do.
- Who can help us find work life balance.

Creating an effective network

The starting point in developing a great network is to examine and analyse our existing network. We must ask whether the people in our network are enabling us to achieve the objectives just covered. That will help us to understand which parts of our network to prune and which to expand and strengthen.

Some decisions can be taken quickly. For example, we should certainly try to reduce the time we spend with people who drain us of our energy by displaying negative behaviours.

Our network should help us in different ways during the different phases in our career. For example, early in our career, a network's biggest value may be providing information. But as we become more senior, sponsorship and political support may be more important.

We could be spending a lot of time with some people. We should ask whether this is really needed as part of the job or because we are doing so without too much thought. That will help us to free up our bandwidth.

After having created room in our network, we need to fill it with the right people in the different categories. While doing this exercise, we could write down some specific outcomes we are trying to achieve and then identify the people who can help us to achieve these outcomes.

Finally, we must ensure that we are leveraging our network effectively. We must get better at asking for help. And asking for help is often easier if we are also providing help to others proactively. Some people in the network may be useful in more than one way. We must ask whether we are properly leveraging their skills.

Conclusion

By putting in place a balanced, well-functioning network, we can connect with different kinds of people, become more effective in our job, get more job satisfaction and find meaning in what we do.