

Networking in the New Reality

Curiosity and reciprocity, plus some ingenuity, will help you build relationships in the age of Zoom.

To many people, networking feels a bit like **squeezing into trousers one size too small**. But networking is essential if you wish to amass the social capital indispensable to a successful career. Its importance has not diminished with the overnight explosion of remote working. If anything, **networking has become more critical**, as jobs and advancement opportunities are swept away by the coronavirus.

Building connections in times like these will require out-of-the-box thinking as well as the same deliberateness and perspectives that characterised effective networking before the world changed, says **Noah Askin**, INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour.

“There’s no magic bullet...Habit formation and goals are going to be essential here,” Askin told participants in the recent INSEAD webinar, *Networking in Our New Reality*, part of the “*Navigating the Turbulence of Covid-19*” series. “This is not something you can now leave to chance.”

He offers a toolkit of practical networking tips and do’s and don’ts. But first, he highlights some common pitfalls.

Bathwater and fresh water

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We may think our existing network of friends, colleagues and family is sufficient, but Askin cautions against inertia. Networks characterised by few, very strong connections – like our circle of family or closest friends – are high in what network experts call “closure”: everyone is typically connected to everyone else. Importantly, these kinds of networks are often based on **homophily**, or the tendency to associate with people who are similar to us. Such strong ties engender trust but often lack diversity, meaning you’re unlikely to learn new and different information.

Networks high on closure are doubtless important, but Askin advises us to also cultivate “brokerage” in our networks; be the bridge between otherwise unconnected groups or individuals. The connections associated with brokerage are often weak ties – people you don’t know particularly well or may only be tangentially connected to, like a friend of a friend. If you find yourself in the position of a broker, it likely feels less comfortable or trustworthy than when you’re in a more “closed” network. Many people struggle when trying to navigate these typically more diverse connections. But brokerage, says Askin, enables you to get information from diverse sources. It’s about the exchange of ideas. It’s conducive for innovation. “Closure, as far as information is concerned, is a bit like drinking your own bathwater,” Askin says. “You’re kind of recycling the same information over and over again.”

That makes brokerage a lot more like fresh water.”

If you're looking for a new job, you're much more likely to find better and newer information from your weak ties than from your closest ties, “because most of the information that your closest ties have you're going to have figured out already”, says Askin. While academics have known this to be the case for decades, it is worth emphasising in light of the current environment.

The importance of being curious

Recognising the rewards of a challenge hardly makes it any easier or more palatable. Some participants of the webinar toss out words like “discomfort”, “difficult” and “tiring” when prompted by Askin to give one word that comes to mind when they hear the word “network”. Therein lies the rub, Askin says.

“Networking just for the sake of networking is gross. I get it. And so I'm not talking about going to those events where you're all standing around tables and making small talk. That's not networking.” Research suggests few people venture out of their comfort zones at such events.

Askin recommends reframing networking, from networking with a capital N to *relationship building*. There are people who are good at making new ties or strengthening existing ties and others who are much better at “value exchange”. That is, giving and eventually getting something in return. Both are crucial in relationship building.

Having a personality strong in **openness**, a trait analogous with curiosity, helps. People who are curious are also good at forming new ties and at giving and taking value, Askin notes. “They don't think of establishing new ties as, ‘Oh, I'm going to network with this person’. They're like, ‘Hmm, who is this individual, I'd like to know more about him or her’.”

Crucially, people for whom networking is chiefly motivated by curiosity will be reinforced by the sense that their behaviour is **authentic**, because it's aligned with their principles and values. They aren't plagued by “gross” feelings born of self-perceived inauthentic attempts to forge connections.

Networking for dummies

For the uninitiated, Askin offers a quick guide:

Step 1: Determine your goals

Think about where you'd like to be in the next one to three years. Identify the people or types of people you'll need to connect with in order to make those

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goals happen.

Step 2: Draw up a contacts list

You'll want a list of 50 to 100 contacts. Says Askin: “What we're talking about here is not necessarily about establishing totally new ties, although they can be in there. It's about people that you know reasonably well – contact them three to four times a year. And it's about strengthening weak ties – keep them updated on what you're doing.”

Don't be afraid to take long shots on someone who is really interesting to you, adds Askin. In such cases, warm introductions by a mutual contact are the way to go. Failing that, cold calls or emails do work some small percent of the time. Still worth the gamble.

Step 3: Start reaching out, regularly

This is the habit-forming part of successful networking. Make contact with two to three people each week. A year later you will have added more than 50 people to your network. Crucially, do your homework before reaching out. “Most people have an array of information about them online, whether it's LinkedIn or a social media site. Use that to your advantage. Find out *who* these people are,” Askin advises. “And be prepared with your own story. ‘I'm interested in x and y, you're somebody who focuses on x and y and would be really helpful to me.’”

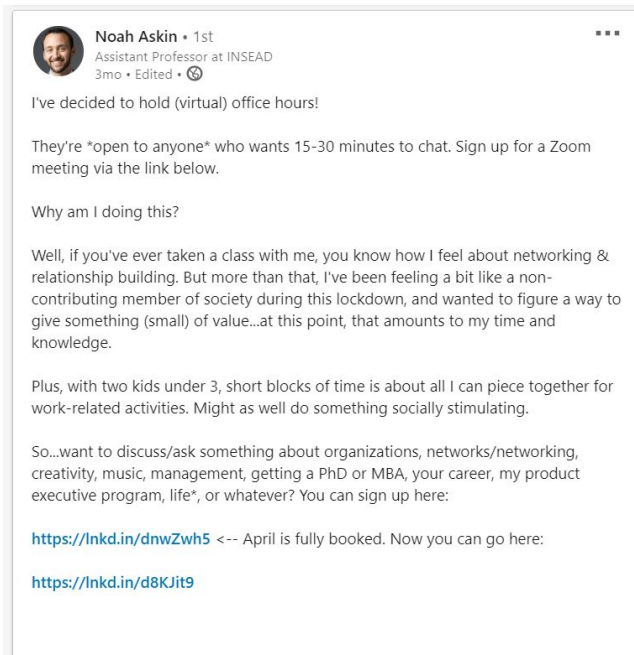
In your journey towards successful networking, remember: Change your behaviour first; your attitude will follow. As Askin puts it: “Think of it like going to the gym. If you think, ‘I just need to psych myself up to do this more often’, you're never going to do it. You're only going to change your attitude by changing your behaviour first. Repetition is far more powerful than willpower.”

Another powerful idea is reciprocity. Simply put, to get connected, make connections. As social animals, human beings are hardwired to return favours. Be somebody that connects people – people are then going to make connections for you.

Invite contacts to come to you

In the era of Zoom and reduced face-to-face contact, what could you do to maintain and even expand your network? Askin suggests taking a page from academia: Set up your very own virtual “office hours”. Here's how: First, set aside one to two hours of 15-minute slots every week. Then, announce on LinkedIn or other social media, or your company intranet that you're hosting 15-minute conversations to exchange ideas and give advice. Be sure to indicate your areas of interest or expertise to invite relevant conversations. Ask interested participants to give you two sentences on why they're reaching

out to you, “so that you're not just getting random people”.



If you think you don't have anything to offer, change your thinking. Askin is clear about relationship building: “I guarantee there are people around the world who would have interest in talking to you, whoever you are, about your experience, your background, your expertise. We think what we know is simple and easy and obvious because it feels that way to us; we have the background and experience. And so we assume that ...everybody else kind of knows it. That's actually not often the case.

“So I would encourage you put yourself out there. And I think you will find that you have much more to offer than you think you do.”

Since **announcing his virtual office hours on LinkedIn**, Askin has had 60 conversations, some of them with people he had no direct connection to. “I've talked to people from all over the world...People from all industries, all career stages, found my post on LinkedIn and they signed up for it.

“You'd be amazed at the reach that you can get if you get enough people that like it and start to share it with their networks – all of a sudden you expand your network. I'd say that well over 90 percent of [my conversations] have been enjoyable, useful or both.”

With the right attitude and framing, networking need not be a pain. As Askin says, approach the world as if you always have something to learn. Consider reaching out as a way of learning or giving. It might even feel good.

INSEAD's webinar series “Navigating the Turbulence of Covid-19” features expert input on key issues surrounding pandemic control and current countermeasures around the world. Watch them **here**.

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