



How to Get Ahead When You Hate Networking

Networking is important for career growth but not everyone loves it.

Eric, an executive at a city firm, developed close ties with an associate partner while working on a special project. The relationship was envied by many of his cohort who saw it as a major asset for future advancement. However, once the project concluded, so did the regular contact and, as Eric did little to cultivate the relationship, it faded over time. “He should be important for me,” Eric noted later, “But since I see a network as something which happens naturally and not artificially, I didn’t really try to keep him.”

Eric’s attitude may seem odd but it is evidence that, even in today’s network-mad world, people are very different in their attitudes about chasing influential contacts and in the importance they place on work relationships when preparing their career strategies.

More than one way to build a relationship

A great deal of research points to the benefits of social networks to create the practical “get-me-ahead” ties instrumental for pushing ahead professional careers. It would be fair, given the weight of research, to ask how do people who aren’t passionate about networking survive? And what can firms do to help them access and leverage the knowledge that comes from developing professional relationships? In an effort to answer these questions, we identified approximately 100 recently-promoted

professionals in the areas of auditing, consulting and law, and over the ensuing 12-16 months **studied** the way they developed their portfolio of professional contacts and, more generally, how they went about networking.

Surprisingly, we found that having a “networking” strategy did not necessarily mean having a penchant for it. In fact, the respondents’ basic attitudes and values with regards to networking differed profoundly. While some clearly had an affinity for developing business relationships and a natural talent for schmoozing, others were uncomfortable networking and a third group refused to take part in a practice they found both manipulative and sleazy.

In our research, we labelled these three groups the Players, the Moderates and the Purists.

Players: Relational entrepreneurs

Players genuinely enjoy meeting people and are strategic in their approach, thinking several moves ahead and creating contacts well before they are needed. In general, Players are socially hyperactive, attending office events, seminars, talks, dinners, etc.; actively branching out in a way that helps them to become “brokers” in the firm, promoting the cross-flow of ideas (as well as raising their own visibility). In our study, we found that

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Players went out of their way to find common ground and establish rapport outside the immediate work context. They understood the benefits of maintaining ties with lead partners, as well as peers who could be used to provide emotional support or exchange strategic information and high-performing subordinates with an eye to ensuring that top talent will return to their team in the future.

Moderates show balance and prudence

Despite the advantages of aggressive networking, the biggest cluster of executives in our study were the Moderates; individuals who appreciate networking but are wary of its power. Moderates' relationship-building tends to emerge from ongoing tasks and joint work experience, with contacts maintained once a given job is over. They seek opportunities to exploit useful relationships but are less likely to ask for targeted favours such as "recommend me to partner X" or "get me on project Y".

We also found that, lacking a pro-active approach to cultivating new contacts, Moderates' networks, unlike Players' ever-expanding Rolodex, have a propensity to shrink over time.

Purists seek different connections

The third group, the Purists, find the whole networking process arduous and less important for their career objectives, which are focused on developing expertise and making an impact on their industry as a professional rather than climbing the partnership ladder. Eric, whose experience we noted above, is an example of a Purist, as is Gerald, a young consultant who believes networking is mostly artificial, done by posers who want to get ahead. Purists like Gerald and Eric, believe networking should come naturally. They may initiate a new contact, but only when their job or task requires it, and without a long-term 'angle' or the desire to tunnel their way into powerful parts of the organisation.

They prize content and the self-sufficiency of their expertise rather than "having connections" and tend to let contacts fade. Their relational energy is focused on their team, stoking team motivation. They are also relatively active when it comes to managing client contacts, considering them an important channel through which the real quality of their work can be recognised. They tend to be wary, however, of too much contact with superiors who are often perceived as a potential source of complication and unpredictability.

Despite their reluctance to schmooze, Purists are not social losers or "geeks". Like all the individuals who took part in our study, they had recently been

promoted, a sign of competence and a signal of trust from their respective professional service firms. They do, however, face disadvantages. During the course of our research, we saw Purists' networks shrink. Even more worrisome, at the end of the study they expressed the least organisational commitment and, to a lesser extent, the least integration with peers. The general risk is that they may end-up "drifting away" within the firm, and become much less substantial actors on the firm's stage than their competence would suggest.

If purists end up leaving the company, their departure can be mistakenly attributed to a lack of capability rather than what it is: A failure to embed them in the firm's culture.

Leveraging Purists' commitment and expertise

Companies that lose Purists risk missing out on the full benefits they can bring.

In our study, they had the least dense networks, which meant they were the most likely to have interesting opportunities for creating new ties. Connecting people who can help one another is a great way to make a difference in any company.

Purists also tend to have a professionalism and dedication to the task. They love the work-at-hand, not the schmooze. Clever managers can leverage this to help Purists develop their networks.

One of the best ways that we know to develop a strong, authentic network is to add value to the people around you, to offer to help others before you need it yourself. Reframing networking in this more altruistic light may better fit with the sensibilities and values of Purist professionals.

Another way managers can help Purists pursue the contacts needed for the channelling of knowledge and resources is to make referrals or share their own social capital. Recent **research** has found that a subordinate connected to a well-networked boss will outperform peers.

HR managers can also encourage relationship building and exploit corporate relationships by expanding task-based networking opportunities and actively looking at ways to reduce the disdain some employees may feel for overt networking events. This could be by highlighting Purists' expertise for internal leverage or building the event around some aspect of the work at hand, such as bringing in a cross-department special speaker, or holding a seminar or symposium.

Firms should also scan their performance management systems for bias. While no company we know of measures and rewards employee

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networking for its own sake, internal performance review systems that inadvertently encourage the accumulation of contacts risk putting the equally valuable but less socially-overt members offside.

Developing networking attitudes

Our research gave us a taste of the overwhelming sense of resentment brewing in the minds of many professionals about the exploits of Players. And, while there is an element of sour grapes towards movers and shakers who indulge in self-promotion, there is the legitimate concern that Players too easily subscribe to the worst of Machiavelli's school of tactics, and focus first and foremost on their self-preservation and not the firm's broader good.

With this in mind, Players too, should consider some self-reflective questions when it comes to networking activity: Are they really helping the firm? What are their motives? And how will their actions be perceived?

It is also important to note that networking profiles are not forever fixed. Humans can learn and adapt. While making a move from Purist to Player is quite rare, people can make adjustments as to how they go about establishing and maintaining social relations in their work settings. Like any change, however, it takes awareness of an individual's current state and some ideas for where it is they want to go.

***Charles Galunic** is a professor of Organisational Behaviour and The Aviva Chaired Professor of Leadership and Responsibility at INSEAD.*

***Ben M. Bensaou** is a Professor of Technology Management and Asian Business and Comparative Management at INSEAD.*

***Claudia Jonczyk-Sédès** is an Associate Professor at the Department of Organisation Studies, ESCP Europe London*

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