



Humans Are Hard-Wired to Hate Networking



By [Kaisa Snellman](#), INSEAD

If you loathe the awkwardness and insincerity of networking, you're not alone. But it needn't be that way.

Few things are as uncomfortable as networking or a pantyhose a size too small. If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. Research shows that most of us find networking unenjoyable and off-putting.

The reason why hunting for business cards with a warm glass of white wine in your hand feels disgusting lies in brain chemistry. According to University of Toronto professor Tiziana Casciaro, networking **makes people feel impure**, both morally and physically. The effect is not limited to mixers and professional events; just sending a LinkedIn request leaves some people feeling dirty.

Moral hygiene

Genuine friendships bring pleasure to both parties. Relationships created to promote one's own career are one-sided and consequently feel selfish and morally questionable. The connection between moral and physical impurity is so strong that even the thought of a networking event can make one want to take a shower.

Casciaro and her research team asked the study subjects to think of a time when they had to meet new people. One group looked back upon situations where they had to get to know people in order to benefit from them; another group remembered spontaneously meeting people working in the same field as themselves. Then, both groups played a game whose object was to supply missing letters to create words. The people who recalled intentional networking were nearly twice as likely to make words linked to cleanliness or washing. So if the task was to fill in "W__H", it became *wash*. The other group suggested neutral words, like *with* or *wish*.

In another experiment, the researchers asked the subjects to think about a person they would like to meet. The first group was instructed to think about potential new friends and approach them via Facebook. The other group pondered who would benefit them most professionally, and to whom it would be worthwhile to send a LinkedIn invitation.

After the test, both groups reported what they had felt and filled in a short product questionnaire. Those who thought about advancing their careers reported feeling uncomfortable, false and dirty. They also showed more interest in products linked to cleaning, such as toothpaste and shower soap, than in ice-cream, for example.

This does not mean that networking is useless, however. According to a survey of American lawyers, those who spent more time networking were also more effective than others in their work. The lawyers who had already climbed higher on the career ladder viewed networking as more benign, and found it less disagreeable, than those beginning their careers.

The results can be interpreted in two ways. Maybe one's attitude towards networking becomes more positive after reaping the career benefits. Or maybe those who are not averse to schmoozing at cocktail parties advance in their careers more rapidly.

The pain of networking

Is it possible to overcome an aversion to networking? According to Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck, everything boils down to having the right attitude. People who believe that certain talents are inherited avoid situations where those talents are challenged. For example, people who believe that singing skills are genetic avoid singing, and do not develop the talent. The opposite way of thinking is that the ability to do something is like a muscle that develops with training. In the words of Dweck, some people have a “growth mindset” while others have a fixed mindset.

My colleague [Ko Kuwabara](#) argues that those who regard networking most positively consider it a skill that can be developed, and not an innate talent. Networking may feel less icky if you approach it just as you would think about going to the gym.

According to Casciaro, one can also change the framing around networking. Her advice is to not think about the value you can selfishly extract from a networking encounter, but rather focus on the reciprocal value you can give to people you meet.

You can test Casciaro’s visualisation training at the next event you really do not feel like going to. As part of your preparations for the evening, ask yourself, “What can I teach others tonight?”

The event will be more agreeable if the pantyhose are the right size and the white wine is cold.

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