
Effective Networking Is About Giving, Not Just Taking



By Charles Galunic , INSEAD

Developing professional relationships starts with adding value to others' lives.

Networking can feel a bit scary for many people. For human social relations, small is often beautiful. After all, for a lot longer than modern civilisation has existed, humans lived in small, close-knit hunter-gatherer groups of **about 150 individuals**. In these groups, we felt safer. We had the capacity to know those around us reasonably well, and to be aware of how they knew each other (which helped us navigate socially). This explains why venturing beyond the familiar can be fraught with some anxiety.

In the modern world, however, networking is essential. Research tells us that extending our network helps us find new jobs, **be more creative** and do well as a **leader** (through the performance of our subordinates). The late entertainment industry legend Clarence Avant constructed a network in his lifetime that bridged many talents such as Bill Withers and Grammy Award-winning producers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. If he didn't navigate the unfamiliar, many of these bridges would never have been formed, and many

talented artists perhaps never discovered. Martin Scorsese's impressive **body of work** included connections with several gifted actors who could be called upon for multiple productions over the years (Robert De Niro, Leonardo DiCaprio and Harvey Keitel, among others). While leveraging this familiarity, he further discovered and worked with a multitude of different actors across his career.

Unfortunately, many of us prefer the familiar. So powerful is this tendency to seek people who are **"similar" to ourselves** that it has a name - homophily - and forms a substantial research subfield. Indeed, despite all of the popular attention on networking, the reality is that many of us find it shallow and overly **transactional**. This shuts us off from discovering meaningful, inspiring and productive connections.

Our dependence on others

No matter how capable and independent we may be, much of our ability to do anything in this world depends upon others. It's remarkable how incredibly dependent we ultimately are on other "experts" (for food, clothing, shelter, technology, information, etc.). Product-market ideas of all sorts depend upon the recombination of ideas from so many fields and experiences that it becomes less probable that it can be accumulated in the mind of solitary individuals. Robinson Crusoe-like development is unlikely to cut it in this day and age.

How can we reach out and make new connections given our human nature? At the risk of over-simplifying things, let's consider three do's and three don'ts:

Do's

1. Have something to give

One of the reasons people loathe networking is because of the way it can be framed. Typically, it's an "ask" and can be seen as a mostly selfish act. The caricature is that of a schmoozy networker who goes into it focused on getting something but giving as little as possible in return.

Non-hierarchical relationships need to go in both directions. Starting with a **mindset of give (first)-and-take** instead of take-take-take can help create value around you and form relationships based on trust. Ask yourself: “How can I use my knowledge, experiences and resources to add value to (new) people around me?” Yes, reciprocation is a very powerful human instinct, and so repayments in kind are likely. However, the idea is not some ostentatious “gift” that makes people suspicious of our intentions. Rather, simply consider, “Am I being as useful as I might, and reaching out to people further afield that I normally do?”

2. Diversify

One of the things that can make you more creative and innovative is the diversity of your network. This is because innovation is fundamentally about **combining pieces of knowledge** that already exist. One of the ways you do this is by developing a network that bridges different pockets of knowledge. Uncorrelated, independent ideas are crucial for us to make better, more creative decisions.

The benefits networking brings to innovation are apparent at diverse organisations like INSEAD. There are around 70 nationalities in any MBA cohort. The 159 faculty members come from 42 countries, while the 67,000-strong alumni are spread across 179 countries. Such a diverse network is perhaps one of the factors why INSEAD placed fourth in **Pitchbook’s latest annual ranking** of MBA programmes by its track record of producing entrepreneurs and start-ups.

3. Build relationships, not just networks

LinkedIn contacts are not necessarily relationships. My guess is that, for most people, the vast majority of our LinkedIn networks are a kilometre wide but a centimetre deep. While this may be fine for simple information exchange (about valuable **job opportunities**, for example), these ties are unlikely to lead to big co-created projects or help you with thorny problems you are trying to solve.

Someone I don't know very well might just send a short response to my email question, but my closer acquaintances and budding friends are more likely to spend a few hours talking and sharing their thoughts. This doesn't mean you must convert all contacts into "BFFs", but developing real connections from some casual "contacts" may be worthwhile.

Don'ts

1. Don't wait until you hit a crisis to network

The worst time to develop your network is probably when you're in big trouble. People can smell the lack of authentic interest in them. They are simply a means to an end, and no one likes to feel that way. Any help you receive can also amount to a substantial social debt. Again, look to build a network when you're in a position of strength, when you have something to give. Don't wait until crisis hits.

2. Don't be held captive by your ego

As we move up in power and authority in our careers, there is the danger that we become complacent in reaching out to new people and exaggerate our importance. We start to let status get in the way, and we see networking as a weakness. Rather, we expect people to come to us, to seek us out as prized connections. We want to be the celebrity that everyone chases.

The problem is that this may happen to us at precisely the moment, such as middle age, when we may need to transition and expand our thinking. Reaching out to others may become even more important as we progress from senior managers to executive leadership. Retaining humility is important: Never stop being curious and engaging with new people, no matter how many titles you have accumulated.

3. Don't overindulge in cliques

The flip side of seeking diversity is avoiding an overindulgence in cliques. Don't misunderstand: We all need a super-trusted inner core of best friends.

That can be a wonderful gift in life, and, as noted, is very natural.

But cliques can emerge. These are smallish, but substantial, closed groups of friends (everyone knows everyone else) with whom we spend much of our time. We crave them because they are easy to get along with and well-aligned to ourselves. The trouble is that they can become echo chambers – we hear similar ideas bounce around, and so these ideas appear more “obviously correct”. Cliques can also take us away from developing new and challenging relationships.

How companies could help reluctant networkers

Companies can play a role in fostering networks, especially among employees who find relationship-building arduous. In a [study](#) of dozens of recently promoted professionals in auditing, consulting and law, my colleague [Ben Bensaou](#), [Claudia Jonczyk Sédès](#) of Université de Neuchâtel and I found that there were three basic networking strategies. A few people put effort into networking, making connections beyond their usual work; some did it but not as actively; a third group, whom we call purists, simply refused to partake in a practice they found manipulative.

Purists tend to be dedicated to their work and feel self-sufficient in their expertise. Their relational energy is focused on their team. They tend to let connections fade. During the 12 to 16 months our research lasted, the purists’ networks shrank. They also expressed the least organisational commitment and the least integration with peers at the end of our study.

But companies that lose purists might miss out on valuable employees. There are ways at various levels of the company to avoid this. Managers can use purists’ professionalism to build bigger networks by promoting networking that focuses on assisting others. Human Resources can help by organising task-based networking opportunities, such as cross-department seminars. Firms should also scan their performance management systems for bias. Internal performance review systems that encourage contact-making without looking at the value created risk disadvantaging purists.

Balanced networks

Our relationships can vary on many dimensions, and the choice is mostly ours. We have very close relationships, we have distant ones, and everything in between. Some people are a lot like us, while others are quite different. Some share our knowledge, and some bring entirely new and different ideas.

Ideally, we should be neither hedgehogs (keeping our heads buried in the same social clique) nor coyotes (sly opportunists scanning the landscape for gain). Rather, we can think about our social relationships and find the balance that our lifestyles and careers require.

This article is adapted from a [commentary](#) published in The Straits Times.

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