

Networking for career success: an emerging trend



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Abstract

Networking is a specific career competency critical in this era of boundaryless careers . Networking represents proactive attempts by individuals to develop and maintain personal and professional relationships with others for the purpose of mutual benefits in their work or career. In today's fast-paced, global, high-tech environment, one's willingness and comfort with networking can significantly impact one's ability to establish contacts and get interviews for jobs. Research has shown that 70-80% of all professional jobs are not obtained through classified advertisements; rather they are obtained through effective and consistent networking. A more diverse network of contacts can extend one's reach into different social circles and consequently enhance one's career opportunities such as obtaining faster promotions and finding jobs. It follows that more promotions and new jobs typically provide one with enhanced compensation. Such networking skills are crucial for career and personal success. Career success i. e. job satisfaction and career satisfaction has many tangible and intangible benefits to the employees and organizations.

However many individuals feel uncomfortable with or unskilled in networking. In particular, the prospect of networking can be rather scary for employees who may consequently refrain from networking with others.

Given the importance of networking for organizations and employees, the paper discusses the benefits and challenges of networking. It also throws light on how HR department can play a strategic role by providing education and training, opportunities to practice, and consistent feedback so that the

employees can become more comfortable and effective in their networking behaviour.

1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced, global, high-tech environment, one's willingness and comfort with networking can significantly impact one's ability to establish contacts, get interviews for jobs, and identify and cultivate mentors. Such networking skills are crucial for career and personal success (Janasz & Forret, 2007). An educated guess estimate 70-80% of all professional jobs are not obtained through classified advertisements; rather they are obtained through effective and consistent networking. Our relationship with others are a resource that can provide new ideas, timely information, job opportunities, business leads, influence, and social support (Baker, 2000). The individuals one knows through networking are the one's who later on share information about potential opportunities or introduce individuals to others who have this information. Individuals try to build and maintain networks by calling and visiting people, socializing before and after regular formal meetings, attending social activities such as parties or lunches, conducting tours and entertaining visitors, doing favours, providing mentoring and advice, giving gifts, using forms of ingratiation such as praise and congratulations, forming alliances and sponsorships, passing on gossip and information that is important to another manager, and engaging in informal conversation about non-work topics such as sports, family and recreational activities who can provide needed information and opportunities (Michael & Yukl, 1993).

Because of its focus on building and nurturing personal and professional relationships to create a system or chain of information, contact and support,

networking has become critical for individual as well as organizational success.

2. Networking

Networking represents proactive attempts by individuals to develop and maintain personal and professional relationships with others for the purpose of mutual benefits in their work or career (Forret & Dougherty, 2001). It has been long realized that the best jobs come from word-of-mouth. Many people spend time in logging on to various job websites for searching jobs and posting their resumes. The chance of getting a call-back is very less because the human resource manager is overloaded with hundreds of resumes from other interested candidates. It would save a lot of efforts and money of an individual if there had been some friend at the company who could recommend his/her name. Networking as a career management strategy is important as the burden of responsibility for one's career, has shifted from the organization to the individual, with the notion of employability becoming one's career goal (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan, 1999).

Developing interpersonal relationships through networking is considered to be a specific career competency vital for managing one's career (Arthur, Claman, & DeFillippi, 1995). Research on protean career has stressed on the importance of performing self-assessments, obtaining developmental work experiences and networking (Hall & Mirvis, 1996). Luthans et al.(1988) in their study of 457 managers of public and private organizations found that managers engaged in four types of activities: traditional management, routine communication, human resource management and networking. Of the four types of activities Luthans et al. found that networking, which was

defined as interacting with outsiders and socializing or politicking, had the strongest relationship with managerial success. In a sample of 247 managers representing 19 companies in various industries Michael and Yukl (1993) found that both internal networking (interactions with others in the organization) and external networking (interactions with outsiders such as client and suppliers) were shown to be related to rate of advancement in the organization.

2. 1 Network benefits and Career Success

It has always been expected that access to information and access to resources relate to objective career success. First, greater access to information and resources should enhance individual work performance. Information and resources have been noted as contextual factors that empower employees leading to higher levels of motivation and performance (Spreitzer, 1996). Improved work performance and adding value should enhance an individual's objective career outcomes (Burt 1992; London & Stumpf, 1983). Second, information and resources are fundamental bases of social power (French & Raven, 1968). Gould and Penley (1984) examined the relationship between networking and salary progression for 217 male and 197 female clerical, professional, and managerial employees of a municipal bureaucracy using a two-item scale and they found that networking was positively related to salary progression for managers only. Greater access to information and resources will increase an individual's organizational reputation (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994; Tsui, 1984), and the individual will be perceived as more powerful or influential in the organization (Brass, 1984). These perceptions should make the individual better able to secure valuable

organizational rewards independent of her or his actual performance (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Luthans et al., 1988). Also access to information and access to resources are positively related to career satisfaction. Having access to relevant organizational information and to resources such as funds, materials and space should increase feelings both of control and competence at work (Gist & Mitchell, 1992) and of psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1996). Psychological empowerment in general and self-determination and competence in particular are extensions of job design theory (Kraimer, Seibert, & Liden, 1999; Spreitzer, 1996) according to which enriched jobs are more satisfying to individuals (Spreitzer, 1996). Thus employees who feel greater psychological empowerment with respect to their careers should be more satisfied with their career progress. Theory supports the existence of a relationship between access to resources and career satisfaction.

2. 2 Types of Networks

Formal Networks

Formal networks or network groups are formally prescribed relationships among functionally defined groups, that exist for the purpose of accomplishing some organizational task (Ibarra, 1993). Formal networks tend to be public, official, and have clear boundaries; they also tend to have an identifiable membership and explicit structure and are officially recognized by employers (McGuire, 2000). Formal networks increase the value and lower the costs of collaboration among professionals. Since formal networks stimulate interactions that the organization sponsors and encourages, they can be managed. Formal networks can be expected to be associated with increased career satisfaction because they may increase the strength of relationship among their members. Network group members will know more

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people or know them better than before. Therefore, participation in formal networks can be expected to provide its members with added information, mentoring and political support and this will be positively related to career satisfaction.

Informal Networks

Informal networks tend to be personal, voluntary and fluid boundaries. Participation in informal networks is not formally governed or officially recognized (McGuire, 2000). Informal social network activities are with organizational members who share for instance, common social interests and are often used as a means to socialize among colleagues and to participate in activities they enjoy. Organizational issues are often discussed unofficially. Personal social networks both within and outside of companies increase the value of collaboration by reducing the search and coordination costs of connecting parties who have related knowledge and interests.

2.3 Building Social Capital

Social capital is any aspect of social structure that creates value and facilitates the actions of the individuals within the social structures (Coleman, 1990). It signifies resources i. e information, influence, solidarity that an individual has in one's disposal by means of the nature of one's relationship ties with others and one's position in a particular social structure (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Networking can improve one's social capital by influencing (1) the size of their social networks (2) the strength of their relationships in the social networks (3) their pattern of relationships in their social network, and (4) the resources of their social network (Forret, 2006)

1. Size refers to the number of members in a social network. Larger networks have been identified with variety of benefits. Morrison (2002) found that having a larger friendship network was positively related to social integration and having a larger information network was associated with increased organizational knowledge and task mastery. The size of one's strategic information network was positively related to number of promotions (Podolny & Baron, 1997).
2. Strength of relationships in social networks refers to the degree of closeness that characterize a relationship. Differences in the amount of social capital available through one's relationships can produce differences in career outcomes. Granovetter (1973) in his study of random sample of job changers found that 56 percent got their jobs through a personal contact (and important finding was that 84 percent of this 56 percent, received jobs through a contact they saw occasionally or rarely (i. e weak ties). He also found that those who get job based on a referral receive a higher salary and have a higher level of job satisfaction compared to those who got jobs by other methods like answer ads or through a search firm. Networking relationships are typically considered to be weak ties (Keele, 1986) and hence, a good source of information about job opportunities and other assistance.
3. The pattern of relationships in a social network is discussed by Burt's (1992) structural theory, which exists when there is no connection between two members of a social network. This gives rise to diverse information and results in upward mobility and greater managerial performance (Burt, 1992; Podolny & Baron, 1997).

4. The resources of a social network refer to the benefits that may be derived. In particular developing relationships with high status individuals has the potential to provide valuable outcomes. Networking has been found to be related to career outcomes of managers such as promotions and salary progression (Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Michael & Yukl, 1993) as well as to more immediate benefits such as information and ideas, social support, job search assistance, and business assistance (Forret & Dougherty, 1997).

2. 3. 1 Model of Social Capital Effects on Career Success

According to study done by Seibert and Liden (2001), two measures of social network structure, weak ties and structural holes are positively related to the level of social resources embedded in a person's network, measured as the number of developmental contacts in functional areas of an organization other than their own and at higher level in the organization. Social resources were in turn positively related to current salary, number of promotions over the career, and career satisfaction through their positive relationships with three measures of network benefits- access to information, access to resources, and career sponsorships.

3. How HR can help employees in networking:

1. Educate employees on importance of networking

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Many employees do not fully understand the practice or value of networking. Some perceive it as using or asking special favours from others to gain an unfair advantage. Some employees don't realize that they have already practiced networking. By providing education and training, opportunities to

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practice, and feedback individuals can become more comfortable and effective in their networking behaviours (Janasz & Forret, 2007). Educating employees on the ways they can offer assistance like encouragement and support, sharing knowledge, getting introduced to people, can help them become valued partners in the relationship (Barton, 2001).

2. Take initiatives in developing Network groups

The HR manager should take initiative in developing Employee Network Group (ENG) and ensure that it:

- Is focused on the business related issues
- Is open to all employees
- Has a local / national organizational structure with officers and holds periodic meetings
- Has an overall mission aligned with the company's business purpose
- Is involved in member professional development activities, business partnerships and community activities.
- Serves as a two-way communications channel with senior management, sensitising management to employees' concerns and communicating company messages to employees

Employee network groups add significant value for the employees who participate, the extent communities in which they interact, and the organization's bottom line. Belonging to a network can enable its members to become more visible in the community and their profession. It also provides its members with the confidence they might need to be nominated for promotion. Networks also provide their members with support and information.

Employees who participate in ENG meetings can get unique networking and learning opportunities. Employees acquire practical project management skills by organizing professional development workshops and community involvement work. The ENG officials and committee responsibilities provide leadership development opportunities that may expand far beyond the employee's regular job.

3. Conduct skill building & experiential exercises

Janasz & Forret (2007) found these exercises useful for undergraduate and graduate business programs, which very well can be applied for employees as well, for providing employee training. Skill building opportunities in how to approach other people and introduce themselves, as well as opportunities to learn how to engage in 'small talk' to help find areas of common interest can enhance individuals 'networking abilities':

Exercise 1: Handshake

The handshake is an integral part of face-to-face, networking in many cultures. It is one of the very first ways in which we develop impressions of other individuals. The employees should be given a situation for role-play where they shake hands with clients, or with people whom they wish to develop relationships. Feedback and discussion should be taken related to differences in body language (eye contact, smile), differences in hand-shakes (firm, sweaty, bone crushing squeezes, limp grips).

Exercise 2: 30 seconds Commercial of Self Promotion:

Networking for job opportunity will be more fruitful if the person looking provides specific information about his needs, desires and marketable skills.

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After preparing their commercials, the participants should pair up and deliver. Listeners posing as potential customers should be providing positive and constructive feedback. Then the role-play is reversed.

This is especially helpful to particularly those who are shy or hesitant about networking. It reduces their fear of networking by practicing in a non-threatening environment. It also reinforces the intended benefits by hearing positive feedback from their partners about their skills and accomplishments. It also provides opportunities to learn from other people's positive aspects and also mistakes.

Exercise 3: Networking Simulation – Utilizing networking skills to make connections

In this exercise the participants build on their previously practiced skills (a positive greeting including firm handshake and eye contact, articulating 30 second commercial) in a given event that requires speed networking. The set is an employee professional organization, or community event. Role assignments are handed out, and participants are instructed to read their role and consider ways to approach others about locating resources that will address their needs. After few minutes of preparation participants are given 15-20 minutes to network at this fictitious event. They are encouraged to make a positive impression even if the people are of no immediate use. Also, they can politely ask the less useful participants to direct them to others who may be more useful. There are two kinds of networkers: those who are self-oriented and those who are focussed on others. In the short term both types of networkers may get what they want, but in the long term, those who are focused on others are more successful. In the long-term those who are

approached by the selfish networker might feel taken advantage of by that individual. At a later date if the networker contacts the person, there is possibility that the person will be less willing to help.

By this exercise participants will learn that networking isn't easy as it looks. It isn't just passing business cards. Instead it requires great concentration and sincere efforts (e. g. remembering names and opportunities to help self and others). They have fun and gain valuable experience with an exercise that provides a fairly realistic yet comfortable opportunity to practice their skills at networking.

Exercise 4: Networking Quiz

A networking quiz can be conducted to know whether the employees are: networking in the organization, networking in the profession and networking in the community (Janasz & Forret, 2007). Accordingly, feedback can be given that whether they are networking enough and if not then where should they be focussing their networking efforts.

4. Encourage mentoring relationship

A mentoring resource refers to an exclusive intensive relationship between the focal individuals and a more powerful and experienced organization member the mentor (Kram, 1985). Mentoring can be incorporated in a formal plan of employee development. Effective mentors serve to widen their protégés horizons by helping with networking and by introducing them to key organizational personnel, which definitely helps them in their career.

4. Conclusion

Those who do not network will fall behind in today's competitive and global environment (Riddle, 1998). Luckily these skills can be learned and applied in a variety of contexts. For those who are shy, networking can be achieved through means other than face-to-face such as an e-mail or letter (Whiting & de Janasz, 2004). After increase in confidence and competence, these approaches can be combined with more direct face-to-face methods such as meetings and conferences. Relationships not only need to be built but also need to be maintained to be effective.

Informing employees that the most effective networking relationships have this collaborative quality, so that individuals sincerely desire to help one another succeed should help them gain a greater appreciation for the effort involved and the potential career opportunities that may arise. The experiential exercises will help employees to increase their understanding of the power of networking and also help them discover networking potential and their ability to harness such potential for personal and professional success.