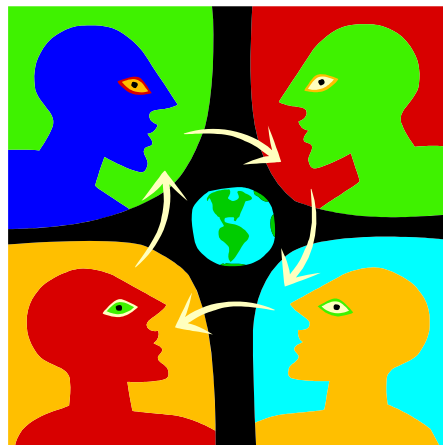


Networking - An Important Tool in Career Management

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***"There is only one thing in the world
worse than being talked about and that is
not being talked about"***

Oscar Wilde



Introduction

Networking is a vital personal tool for active career management. In this paper we look at the basic question of why a professional needs to network and utilise the activity as part of self-management of their career. We consider the value of networking, who to network with, how to network, when and where to network and how to manage networking for maximum results.

Why Network?

As Oscar Wilde phrased it, you need to be known. You may have the best academic qualifications possible, you may have written amazing discourses, but securing a professional career involves people knowing of you and of your abilities. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures in 1999 show that 70% of job seekers source their new role through networking.

Change is occurring rapidly, only a few decades ago employers offered jobs for life but now this is rare. Where your employer once managed your career, now you have to take matters into your own hands. In this developing technological and business arena with new skills and rapid change you need to take as much protection as possible. Your protection comes from your on-going technical competence through professional development and from your connection with other professionals. Networking satisfies both of these criteria.

Networking is the heart and lungs of giving your career life and of maintaining a career path. Networking gives you the opportunity to expand the number of people who know you. You need a broad range of other professionals to know you and to know your capabilities and competencies. Mentoring is one component of networking, in itself a valuable tool for career management and involving a one-on-one association with a key personal advisor. The full compass of networking is an ongoing process of actively fostering a broad range of contacts, of keeping in touch with what is happening within and outside your field of skills and of gaining and circulating information.



In short, you network to:

- Gain personal visibility; and
- Get information.

What's in it for you?

The short answer is Social Capital. Just as an important part of a company's assets is their human capital, a vital part of your asset is your Social Capital. You have knowledge and you have experience, these are assets of you as a person, but without your Social Capital you cannot utilise your full potential.

Social Capital is your connection to other people. Some people have a higher level of Social Capital because they are better connected to other people through an active network. But, anyone can increase their Social Capital by an active program of networking.

Building and enhancing your own Social Capital creates and maintains a high level of your assets, increases your attractiveness in the employment market and gives you a much greater degree of flexibility to get what you want and to do what you want to do.

Building and utilising your own Social Capital achieves:

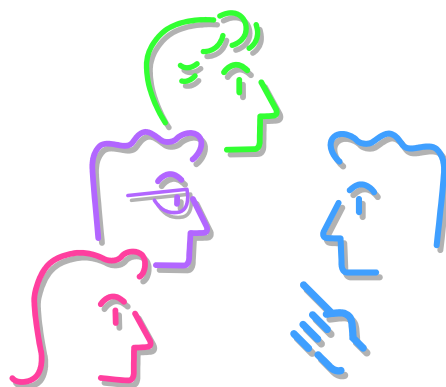
- Visibility - you are known by a wide group of contacts, associates and other professionals;
- Your keeping current with trends and new ideas in your technical field;
- Your keeping current with people changes in your field;
- Your increase in awareness of opportunities for your career advancement;
- Your learning of opportunities for moves in your career;
- Your increased creativity in proposing solutions to others to lead to your own career enhancement; and, of course
- Your increase in your range of contacts.

Who to network with

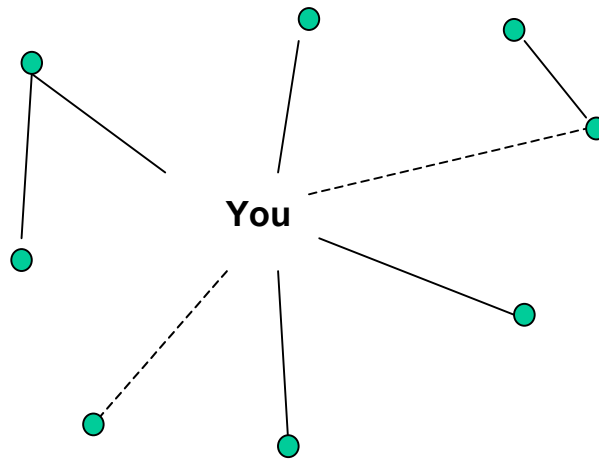
At the outset let us be aware that life presents constant opportunities to network. We have networking tools laid on, the telephone, the internet and e-mail, but even when you go to the local shop and buy a newspaper you may run into someone who could give you your next job.

Lets look at the network structure of one person. The existing networks will include all or some of these:

- Personal - family and friends. With this set of people you can relax, be yourself and discuss matters which are of interest to you in both life and career. Your family should be a source of mentoring and your friends will have their own family and other friends that may be worthwhile extending contact with;
- Social - the next circle out. People with whom you have less frequent contact through social functions, sporting activities and other pursuits. Let these people know what you are seeking in terms of a career and see what links may be there; and
- Professional - university staff, professional association contacts, employers and co-workers.

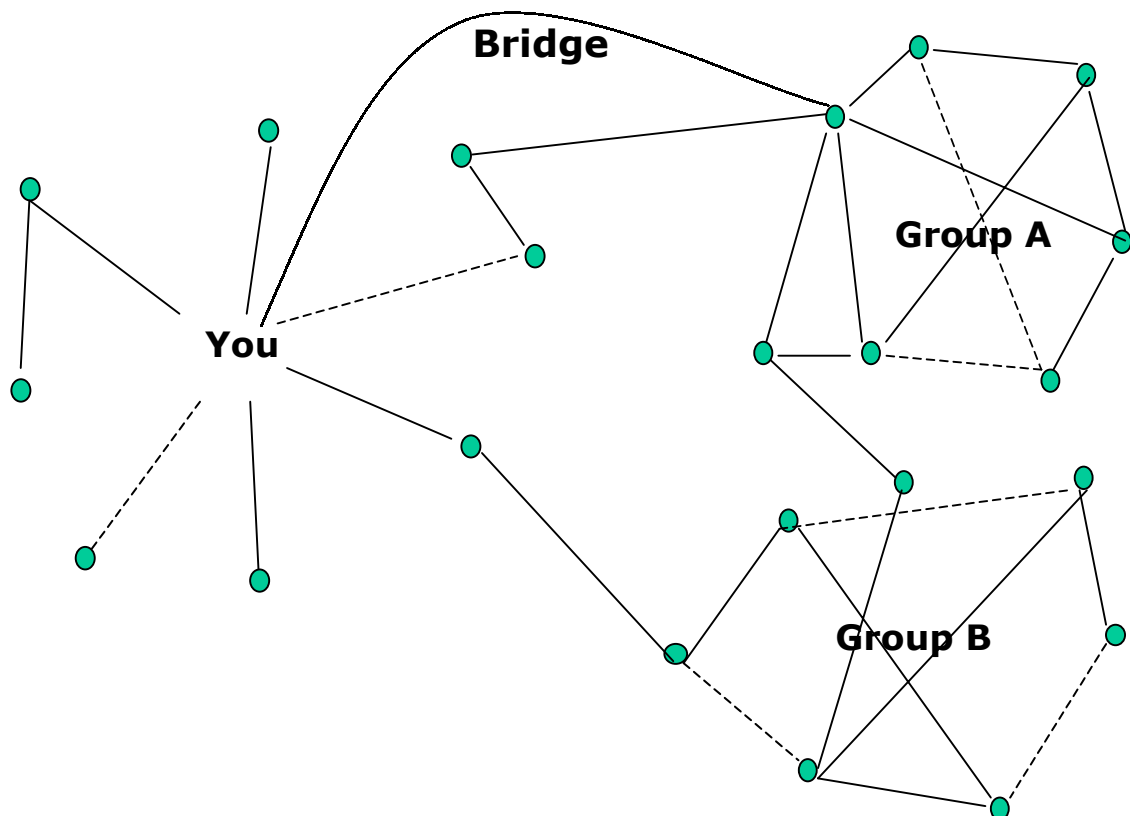


A simplified personal network may look something like this:



Here this person has four strong links and two weaker links. The stronger contacts are family and friends and the weaker ones are sport or pastime associates. Further, two of the contacts have additional relevant or interesting links. This basic structure is typical of a new graduate who has not worked up opportunities and grown their network.

Now let us look at someone who has worked at their network and built some bridges into other networks. These other networks may be associations of professionals working in a field into which the networker wants to advance professionally. We see that the networker has identified two groups of interest. Each of these groups will be typical with strong and weak links and they have a few cross-links to the networker and to each other.



The aim of this networker was to build a personal bridge across to the other groups using the links of the existing contacts. A link into Group A has been achieved. Bridges such as these are the Social Capital of the networker.

This person is now building their networks and can start using the broader links for their career advancement. A word of caution is that the bridge links have a very high decay rate, one study (*Burt*) shows 90% of bridges decay in a year, but if the bridges are maintained and nurtured the decay rate past one year decreases.

So, whom do you network with?

The starting point comes from the age-old answer:

Identify your goals and make a career plan.

Your goal may be to participate in lively intellectual conversation, explore technological advances in your field, get a job or a new and better job or make a career change. However, remember you are after visibility as well as information. Be clear on what you want and plan your networking to achieve these goals.

You will want to enter into a network that can lead you to your goals and you will need to use your existing network to determine whom you need to find. You may need to engage with some of your weaker links (university lecturers or tutors) and determine what they know about the area that you want to explore or do some web or other research.

How to network

At this stage you have identified your goals. Now it is time to start planning your network tree. You have started to look for people who may be able to provide guidance for you, write down these names as the start of your network tree. Write down who you know and then who they know. Note what the relevance is of each of these secondary contact persons.



You are building a list of people; you do not need many over 20 contacts at this stage, more than that will not be manageable. Be prepared for your list to change rapidly as you start exploration.

Ideally your network will involve a set of people with whom you can develop a mutual relationship. Obviously do not limit your group to those with similar background and experience, you must be establishing the bridges into other groups. Often it may seem initially that you have nothing to offer these contacts out at the end of your bridges. However, you might be surprised that effective networkers enjoy engaging with other groups. So, perhaps you are able to bring different viewpoints and different stories. We will not linger here on the value to discourse of story telling other than to say story telling and metaphors are a very powerful tool for exchange of ideas.

Remembering that you are seeking visibility and information, your list should have some potential contacts who, in addition to those who can directly help you, are:

- People whom you may be able to help but are not able to help you;
- People in a different age group from you; and
- People in other professional fields from your current field or your target field.

With the list made (and the list will be remade many times over) you must plan your networking. We will look at the following:



- Research the contacts. What is their professional role, what are details of their organisation, what is the link between you and them (i.e. mutual contacts, mutual interests) and what particular expertise do they have?
- Think about how you will approach them. By phone, by e-mail, by direct approach at a meeting;
- Think out what you will say. Clearly you will not directly initially ask for a job but do not avoid people who can give you a job just because you do not feel comfortable about being too up front; and
- Work out how you will conduct yourself during the meeting.

Your contact list will not only consist of people but also organisations such as professional associations, sporting groups, community groups etc. Do join professional associations which have as part of their membership those engaged in the profession where you want to gain entry or advance.

Your immediate set of friends and contacts will lead you across the bridges and your research sources are your friends and contacts themselves, the web, magazines, trade other and publications. Add these details to your network tree, to the who add what and why. Consider in what way might this contact be able to provide some leverage for your career advancement. Can they provide information, leads, or even jobs directly?

Use available resources:

- Friends, your own network;
- University lecturers, tutors;
- University department listings of employers, graduate destinations;
- Professional associations meetings, web sites, journals;
- Employment advertisements in newspapers, web sites;
- Trade magazines, company publications and web sites;
- Careers advisory services at university, government and other organisations through web searches.

When and where to network

Your research will guide you with regard to the best way to approach the next contact. As well as the telephone and e-mail it could be by letter. With a letter you might for instance include a copy of a report or paper you've written and you can request comments.

If you want to join a professional association your research will tell you the admission requirements and in some case you might need a sponsor for your application. If your immediate contacts cannot help you might need some bridge contacts. In these circumstances using a bridge contact is a very powerful link if they sponsor your admission because you are validating your respect for their involvement. Failing a direct contact, get in touch with the association and ask how you might connect up with them as you wish to join.

Your plan will have told you about the person or group with whom you who are going to make contact, now think about the tone of your approach. Certainly you cannot be demanding an audience but nor at the other extreme can you just ask for "a meeting if possible". If you are requesting your appointment by telephone, practice first what you are going to say and ensure that you have no distractions in the background. Outline briefly how you have this person's name, why you are interested in meeting with them and give a timeframe for the meeting. It may well be that a phone call will not lead to a meeting but will lead to information and possibly one or two referrals.

The meeting may be in a formal one to one setting in an office, a coffee shop or over drinks. It may be in a group situation at a meeting. Before the meeting, know clearly what you want to achieve and prepare yourself:

- Know not only your contact's name but also the pronunciation of their name. Know their position in the organisation;
- Think about how you will arrive on time, what you will carry your documents in and what you will wear; and
- Relax.

Your approach will vary according to how you have set up the encounter. Approach the conversation as you would with a friend rather than an adversary. The art of communication in networking involves:

- Asking open ended questions;
- Listening to the answer and allowing the answer to finish without jumping in;
- Making eye contact and allowing body language to say "*I am interested in what you are saying*"; and
- Watching the body language of the other person in case you touch on subjects which should be left alone or you are taking too much of their time.

Some basic starting points for a conversation may be to say:

- *I have been doing .. (research, hobby, academic etc) .. and am interested in .. (further study, research, information etc). I understand that you are involved in this area and I was wondering if you would be able to provide me with some guidance on how I might get more information or move into a career in this area,*
- *Who else do you think I should be talking to for me to get details? Are there any groups or professional associations I could join up with?*
- *What hints could you give me to achieve my aim?*
- *I wondered if you had the opportunity to read my paper and whether you have any comments?*
- After someone has presented a paper or a talk or even been discussing a subject in a group you can come in with questions such as "*I was really interested to hear you say .., does that mean that .. etc*".

You may have your roadmap of the meeting written in note form to remind yourself of what questions you want to ask and where you want to lead. Your prior planning will stop you rambling and possibly losing the attention of your contact.

Asking the questions is important, but listening is even more important. You have gone to the effort to get this far, make the most of the information and do not be afraid to take notes.

How you conduct yourself is important. Remember you are building a bridge professional to professional. Dress in a style suitable for the occasion and behave in a matching manner.

If you have submitted a paper for comments have a copy of the paper with you. If you have written a letter of introduction, refresh your memory with what you have said and have a copy of the letter with you. If you want to talk about a paper that the contact has written or presented, have a copy with you.

Be prepared by having some form of business card with you. You are seeking visibility and want to be remembered. It will not be good enough to scribble your mobile number on the back of a drink coaster. Business cards may seem to be a bit formal when you are starting out in networking, but they are the best way to give your details to a contact and either you or the contact can write additional information on the cards, such as 'interested in ..'.

Ending the meeting

Do keep an eye on time.

If you have asked for 15 minutes at a one-on-one meeting be ready to wrap it up at that time. Your contact may extend the meeting but you should not. Watch that body language.

In a group meeting *do not keep looking over your contact's head* for the next person you can buttonhole.

If you are not achieving what you want make a polite break, shake hands, smile and move on.

Thank your contact for their comments and assistance.

Leave yourself the opportunity to follow up any matters by saying you would like to call them and that you would be pleased to let them know how you are getting on. If they have given you suggestions of further contacts acknowledge the source of the information and feedback to results.

Only use information which was given to you for you to utilise and be cautious about passing on information which was given in confidence.

Do keep in touch and be ready to give back value.

This may take time but be as prepared to give as to take.

Do send an e-mail or a note

With both one-on-one meetings and with contact as group meetings send a message thanking the person for the opportunity to discuss matters with them and express your wish to meet them again. Do take the time to meet them again.

Communication

Let's have a look at the basics of the whys and how to communicate. See also Appendix 1 - Three different styles of communication behaviour



Be enthusiastic and enjoy the contact.

Keep eye contact either one-on-one or with speakers in a group, but the eye contact should be soft not aggressive.

Neither patronise with your eye contact (do not look over the top of your spectacles) nor conduct a body search.

Use the other person's name in your conversation.

Listen.

You are meeting to find information so be prepared to receive it. Get to know your contacts by not only listening but also hearing.

Give your contact standing by showing that you are hearing them by feeding back what they have told you "That's useful to know that ..." or engaging in what they've said.

Constructively use the pause button in the conversation by saying "Can I just check that I've understood what you are saying/suggesting etc ... Do you mean that ..." and repeat in summary what they have said.

Ask questions.

Your questions should encourage further conversation and therefore seek further information flow. Your questions may either be on the lines of the feedback as in the previous paragraph to continue the line of conversation flow or you may seek to direct the conversation to gain specific information.

Your prior research and planned questions will come into play here. However, once the conversation interplay is underway you may ask questions which require short answers.

Cautions.

Active listening is neither passive nor aggressive.

Passive is not participating, being defensive and withdrawing into a despair of self-doubt.

Aggressive is seeking to control the encounter and can involve the full range of attacking ideas, blaming others for unsatisfactory outcomes to defensiveness.

Avoid negativity such as "I tried that but ..", "That will not work" and "That's great in theory but" or even "That's too hard".

Likewise avoid black and white situations and dogmatic positions such as who is correct and who is wrong.



Maintenance - managing your network for maximum results

We have already discussed the importance of follow-up, thanking your contact for their information, letting them know that you valued and used that information and looking for ways to help them. Your follow up contact might also suggest a further meeting. Remind your contact of who you are and where you met. If you follow up by phone, make sure that they have the time to talk with you with a "Can you talk for a few minutes?" However, while you want to be interested and assertive, you don't want to be too aggressive and burn bridges.

Earlier we found that the bridges you build are highly susceptible to decay, you must work to maintain those bridges, to maintain your Social Capital. A bridge contact can be an expensive one in terms of time and effort, but keeping in touch with contacts builds respect and trust and exposes you to a variety of information and to unforeseen opportunities.

Keep your networks manageable.

Keep your contact lists and files up to date, maintain your business card files and electronic contacts list. Plan your work and work your plan. Keep up to date with journals, news, events and your technical and non-technical skills.

Lastly, you have built a substantial asset in your network. View your network not as the tool to satisfy your short-term need to find a job, but rather as that vital tool for your whole of life career plan.

Do not abandon your network as it is far more difficult to rebuild a network than it is to maintain one.

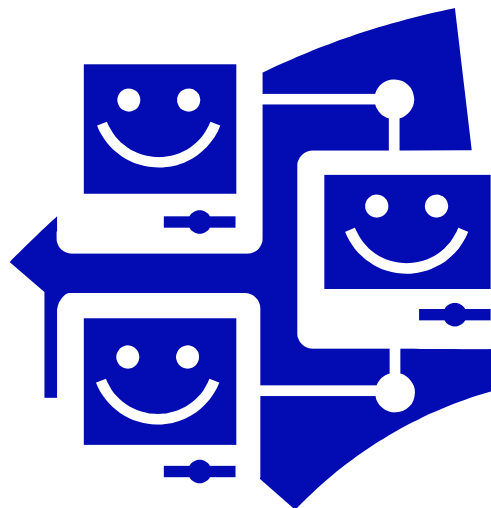
Conclusions

Use networking as a tool in managing your career. Networking can be fun. Plan your networking, plan to enjoy it and build your Social Capital. Do your research, remember names, make notes and use business cards. Do not be backwards in asking for advice and opinions and respect positions. Be honest and true to your word. Maintain your Social Capital.

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Burt, Ronald S. Bridge Decay, December 2001. Social Networks.



Appendix 1

Three different styles of communication behaviour *(Barrington Centre Pty Ltd)*

Non-assertive/ passive	Assertive	Aggressive
Hides feelings.	Communicates feelings openly and honestly with respect and regard for the other person.	Communicates feelings inappropriately without considering the other person.
Anxious to please even at the expense of self.	Considers other and self	Only considers self.
Not open.	Uses 'I' messages.	Uses 'You' messages.
Poor eye contact.	Uses eye contact.	Stares people down.
Timid demeanor.	Confident demeanor.	Shouts, name calls.
Can be manipulative.	Listens to other people.	Does not listen.
Doormat. Poor me.	Willing to take risks.	Threatens, bullies, uses size to dominate.
Always gives in. Victim.	Willing to negotiate.	Refuses to compromise, must have own way.
Sulks, whinges.	Speaks calmly.	Rants and raves.
Dependent.	Independent.	Dependent or independent.