



# Networking in the 21st Century – don't get left behind!

Lisa Butler

The crowded function room of a large inner city hotel is filled with the loud hum of corporately attired guests entrenched in conversation. Glasses filled, introductions made, business discussed and cards exchanged..... sounds like it could be any business networking event anywhere in the world.

For many people, this picture defines networking, and it's not surprising this scenario is not terribly appealing to everyone. It can generate an air of insincerity and discomfort.

If you, like many others, hold this rather negative view of networking, take heart – now more than ever we are becoming aware that networking in its truest form is very different to the situation described above. Truly effective networking is grounded in genuine interest in helping others.

Networking is rapidly being recognised as a critical business, career and leadership skill. Research has proven that at an operational level, an individual's productivity is inextricably linked to their networking capability. The fortuitous networkers within organisations are reaping the rewards of hastened career progression, leadership opportunities, greater job satisfaction and business success. Those who aren't so networking savvy are being left in their wake.

As learning and development professionals we play an important role in shifting

mindsets, developing networking capability, and motivating our clients to network effectively.

To be successful, we need to understand the role of networking in the 21st century, and what we can do as learning and development professionals to maximise the opportunities that networking can provide for both our clients and ourselves.

## What is networking in the 21st Century?

Networking is about relationship building. I define it as building and maintaining genuinely helpful relationships with other people, for mutual benefit. It's about creating a diversity of connections and win-win alliances with others through nurturing relationships based on trust.

We can see its value in so many aspects of our lives – our business, careers, even our personal lives. Many people view networking as the sole domain of those who need to bring business in the door. How wrong they are!

The research backs this up. McKinsey's recent research on the competencies that differentiate successful women from their less successful peers found that networking is in the top five.

Similarly, from their research about networking and leadership success in *Harvard Business Review*, Herminia Ibarra and Mark Hunter state that what differentiates a manager from a leader is their ability to network both internally and externally.

Herminia Ibarra, from the French business school INSEAD, is leading the charge in shifting views internationally regarding the

real value of networking. In her research she has discovered that we tend to network at three levels – *operational, strategic and personal*.

## Operational networking

At an *operational* level networking involves cultivating relationships with people you need to get your job done. For a learning and development specialist, these people may include the marketing manager, the human resources manager, line managers of the divisions you support, and external suppliers.

## Strategic networking

At a *strategic* level, it is important to consider how you should be networking to achieve your business and career goals. Where are you headed in your business, role or career? How can networking help you? Who should you be networking with and how can you meet those people? What can you do for them?

To network strategically, we need to have a clear understanding of our current network of contacts as well as the contacts we ideally need in our network. Many organisations provide systems to help their employees record details of clients and prospective clients (CRM systems). However, few people, in my experience, keep individual records of their personal network of contacts.

## Personal networking

At a *personal* level, networking for more social reasons often reaps rewards in our businesses and careers as well. Going to the school reunion, catching up with the other



parents on the sidelines of the soccer field or netball courts, going to the corporate golf days are all important for allowing you to diversify your network of contacts with like-minded professional people.

### What role do L&D professionals play?

Learning and development professionals play a key role in helping others to maximise their networking advantage. This may involve working with them to shift their mindset, developing their networking capability, and encouraging them to use systems to monitor and track their network of contacts.

#### 1. Shifting mindsets

In my business I am fortunate to be able to work with clients who are professional and intelligent. Interestingly, this doesn't necessarily mean that they understand the true nature of networking and its benefits. This is the first step towards improving networking capability.

I often suggest to my clients that whilst running networking training is an important part of shifting mindset as well as building capability, it will be more beneficial in the long run if it is backed up internally through effective communication, leadership, systems, policies and procedures. For example:

- incorporating networking KPIs in the performance management process;
- communicating networking as a key competency for everyone in the organisation, not just those on the front line;
- provide opportunities for people to practise (eg internal networking opportunities) and encourage attendance at relevant external networking events;
- encourage staff to network online, through internal blogs and external websites (eg Linked In);
- encourage senior people to involve more junior people in networking situations to enable role modelling of appropriate networking behaviours.

I often hear people in my programs say that their managers send them to networking events with the expectation of getting as

many business cards out there as possible and bringing back some business. This is not only difficult and uncomfortable for the majority of people, it also defeats the purpose of networking. Shifting mindset needs to be done across the organisation, to ensure everyone has the same understanding of what is expected.

#### 2. Capability

Networking skills can be learned. People often assume that more naturally extroverted souls are better at it than their more introverted colleagues. Once we get a grasp of the true nature of networking it is easy to see that in practice, more effective networking requires the qualities of both introverted and extroverted people.

Extroverts can leverage from their natural confidence in getting people engaged in conversation, yet may need to consider more strategically where they network, who they should keep in contact with, how they can help people, and how they will monitor their network. Introverts tend to do this strategic part quite well, yet often lack the confidence to get out there and start talking to people.

Training programs aimed at giving people the tools to help them network as well as the practical opportunity to network are extremely effective. We have delivered countless training programs over the years for a wide range of clients, and I find the programs where people don't know each other, and there is benefit in them networking, are always the most successful.

I also suggest that it is important to give people the opportunity to practise. In-house social occasions, the growth of office "coffee spots" and encouraging people to attend relevant external events are just a few examples. One of my large law firm clients recently allowed their junior lawyers to organise a function for their contacts of a similar age and stage in their careers.

#### 3. Systems

This is the age of technology and we need to take advantage of it. We also have a generation coming up the ranks that relies more heavily on technology to communicate. I know of some companies (eg IBM and Sun Microsystems) who have created systems to allow for internal

blogging, allowing people to congregate online and share ideas and manage projects.

Encouraging people to create and use their own database of personal networking contacts (eg Outlook contacts) is another way we can help people to monitor and maintain contact with their network.

### In summary

Many people are hesitant to network, often due to misperceptions about the true nature of networking. As learning and development professionals, we can personally reap the rewards that networking offers, and we play an important role in helping our clients to appreciate the value of networking and the positive impact it can have operationally (getting our jobs done), in career development, business development and leadership.

### Further reading:

Barsh, Joanna; Cranston, Susie; Craske, Rebecca; Centered leadership: How talented women thrive; *McKinsey Quarterly*, September 2008

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Gladwell, Malcolm; *The tipping point*; Abacus, 2000

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Ibarra, Herminia; *Networking is vital for successful managers*; [www.knowledge.insead.edu/contents/ibarra.cfm](http://www.knowledge.insead.edu/contents/ibarra.cfm)

Maister, David; and Green, Charles; Galford, Robert; *The Trusted Advisor*; Touchstone; 2000

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