



Think before you mingle

IS NETWORKING WORTH YOUR TIME? ONLY IF YOU PLAN, STRATEGISE AND HONE YOUR APPROACH. DARRYL HOWES EXPLAINS

Last year, *Harvard Business Review* published an article that appeared to turn received wisdom on networking on its head, causing consternation among its readership and a wider community of commentators.

For a moment, networking seemed destined for the business back-burner.

The context? On no less a stage than the World

Economic Forum, networking supremo, venture capitalist and entrepreneur Rich Stromback (also known as Mr Davos) was said to have uttered a damning indictment of networking, when he argued that our attempts to connect with our fellow man and woman are, mostly, all for nought.

But what Stromback actually said deserves closer analysis.

While recognising the value of high-profile Davos-type events, which offer unrivalled opportunity for face-to-face contact with influential business people, Stromback commented: "Ninety-nine per cent of Davos is information or experience you can get elsewhere, on your own timeframe and in a more comfortable manner."

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Equally enlightening was his response to a question on whether connecting with influencers represents valuable, real work: "The answer is to be extremely efficient and focus on what is truly essential," he said.

So, how can we increase our networking efficiency and at the same time be open to new methods of connecting for business purposes?

Strategic networking

Networks can take many forms. Heavyweight computing power, coupled with the recent availability of massive social media data sets, show that we are only just beginning to understand how they operate.

Herminia Ibarra, professor of organisational behaviour at INSEAD Business School, categorises networks under three headings. The first is operational: those relationships required to get our work done. The second is personal, for example, through membership of exclusive groups or affiliations.

However, according to Ibarra, it is only strategic networks, the third and by far the most important type, that can plug the individual into a source of collaborative power that can help drive both individual and organisational goals. Ibarra defines strategic networking as: "the ability to marshall information, support and resources from one sector of a network to achieve results in another".

Since the 1970s, it's been known that exclusive networks, ie those based on traditional social groupings such as school, university

practices. If we don't, we can spend valuable time attending events and building alliances that fail to deliver on our needs. In effect, we'll end up doing the right things, but in the wrong way.

Our start point should therefore be to decide exactly what we want from our networking. How much resource, including time commitment, do we have available to devote to it? What tangible outcomes are we seeking to achieve, and is our normal default mode of connecting with people serving us in the best way?

Disruptive power

The 24/7 digitally connected and disrupted world means we don't have to behave in the same old ways. On the other hand, we cannot sell ourselves (for that is what we are doing) entirely online.

Traditional face-to-face networking always involves a form of honeymoon period. Both parties engage in small talk, get to know each other and build trust. This is a necessary

An altogether different approach allows us to find the right kind of contacts using LinkedIn and, where appropriate, orchestrate mutually beneficial introductions via our first- or second-degree connections. This way, building a network becomes less about chance meetings and more about coordinated strategy.



After making a connection, the online small talk aspect can be very helpful, through steady but non-intrusive communication of information

that may be useful to a new contact – whether that takes the form of sharing articles, discussion points, general commentary or technical matter.

This is most definitely not spam; the language should be personal and social in nature (it is social media after all) and this practice can be supplemented by LinkedIn's diary features, which highlight work anniversaries, personal events, LinkedIn posts and so on, providing users with a reason and opportunity to reach out.

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or workplace, do not help if we are looking for fresh thinking and inspiration. Stanford social psychologist Mark Granovetter established that 'weak tie' alliances were far better for developing truly useful collaboration. In a modern-knowledge economy, it's easy to see how the 'social superglue' of the former can be usurped by the latter, a form of intellectually lubricating social WD40.

Furthermore, today's time-poor work environment might require us to adopt a new approach to our networking

precursor before moving to the separate context of a more formal exchange of business needs, for example, securing that sought-after introduction to a new client or finding a mentor for career development.

But the investment in time required to seek out, research and attend events can prove prohibitive. This is especially so when event organisers are understandably guarded over attendee data and there is no guarantee of the person you want to meet actually being at a given event.

GRANOVETTER'S 'WEAK TIES'

In a series of experiments designed to understand how people improve their employment prospects, Stanford social psychologist Mark Granovetter interviewed job-seeking participants. He established that, while strong ties breed local social cohesion, they also lead to wider fragmentation. Granovetter claims that a more effective and perhaps more agile networking strategy is to nurture weak ties across, within and beyond our normal close associations. The paradox is that weak ties actually further the integration of individuals among disparate social groups. In short, Granovetter says that weak ties are "indispensable to individuals' opportunities".

Opportunities

It's for all of us to decide on a networking strategy that works according to the resources available to us. But it must be time to consider using a blended range of methods in a more focused and less hit-and-miss fashion.

Social media provides us with new tools and opportunities. If we are to take full advantage of these, we need to consider our network structures and whether we should break out from the exclusive alliances that might restrict our thinking and blind us from a wider range of possibilities.

The final word should go to Stromback: "I need to be selective, yet authentic; focused, yet open to possibilities. Opportunities do not float like clouds in the sky. They are attached to people."

Networking is a social activity, but that doesn't mean it can't be strategic. ♦

Darryl Howes is a learning and development consultant at DDNS Consulting Ltd

