

Networking: An Essential Skill for Career Management

When it comes to your career, are you in the driver's seat? If you are feeling like your career is primarily driven by external forces, you are not alone. Too often, we see individuals whose career paths are determined by particular events, such as a promotion or a termination, rather than being an intentional, ongoing, self-driven process. You may feel like there is little clarity as to how you got here and where you are going next. Instead of being a passenger along for the ride, it's time to take ownership of your career. Building a strong professional network in your organization, as well as externally, is a great place to start.

Networking is for everyone

If your career planning has been arbitrary, it might be because you've tried to go it alone. However, you can't manage your career effectively if you are operating in a silo: simply put, you don't know what you don't know. Are there other career paths for people with your skillset that you might consider? Are there changes on the horizon for your industry that would require new skills? What is a different or more senior role in your area really like? How might you transfer your skills to a different industry? Questions like these, which are essential for navigating the way forward, are difficult to answer by yourself. You need an external perspective, which is why networking is a key component of effective career management.

If you think that networking is just for those early in their career, think again. Whether you have just started your career or are an experienced professional, external guidance is always important. What might change over time is who you network with, the type of relationship you seek, or the information you are interested in. Early in your career, you might be looking to connect with those 3-5 years ahead of where you are, whereas later, that might move out to 5-10 years. Over time, you may also shift from seeking out professionals who can serve as a mentor to those that can be more of an advisor.

Networking isn't just for those who are looking to climb the corporate ladder, either. In fact, networking can help you decide if you want to move vertically, change roles, leave the organization, switch industries, or stay on your current path. Connecting with others can give you perspective on how your current skills, knowledge and experience position you for other roles and the areas in which you need to develop to sustain your marketability. After all, if you don't learn, you coast, and if you coast, you fall behind in your career. Talking to others can also help you realize whether or not your expectations align with reality: a role that looks appealing in theory might be very

different in practice. And, as an added bonus: having a strong internal network will prove to be beneficial in today's collaborative work environments.

When we say that networking is for everyone, we mean it.

How to network like a pro

Networking is about more than the number of connections you have on LinkedIn. To make the most of your network, you must think strategically and have a plan. This should include researching individuals, organizations, or industries, identifying and approaching the right connections, engaging with them effectively, and investing time in sustaining your relationships.

Who is in your network?

You may start out by growing your network organically through those you meet on projects or committees, in professional groups, or at social events. Over time, you can transition to a more strategic approach by seeking out connections to stay current on trends in the marketplace or to further your career goals. For example, if you are considering a lateral move, you may seek out individuals inside and outside of your organization who work in similar roles. If you are interested in moving up, your focus will be on connecting with those in more senior roles.

Keep in mind that certain connections may prove useful in the future, even if their value may not be immediately apparent. Don't discount organic growth entirely as you become more strategic about your network. Social connections can also be important in making referrals or may directly lead to career opportunities down the road.

Doing your research

What you get out of a networking meeting is largely determined by how you prepare for it. The networking meeting is yours to run, so identify your goal and formulate some good questions.

Research the person with whom you are meeting. The more background information you gather in advance, the more you can shift the conversation from learning basic facts to gaining insights. For example, you could ask someone about their career path, and you'll get a list of their past roles. Or you could review their LinkedIn profile in advance and ask about one specific transition point, which will give you a more nuanced perspective on how to take the next step in your career.

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Don't miss the opportunity to expand your network even further. Review the individual's connections on LinkedIn and identify a couple of people so that you can ask them to facilitate an introduction.

Networking shouldn't be one-sided, so think of ways that you can help them. Is there an idea that you can bring to the table or a new perspective on a challenge? When you begin to provide value to others, it levels the playing field. They start to see you as an important resource in their network. This encourages people to seek you out and introduce you to others.

In the meeting

To get the most out of your meeting, you should do more listening than talking. After all, you are there to get their perspective, guidance and insights. Keep your goal in mind and use the questions you've prepared to guide the conversation. It can be easy to get side-tracked on common interests and lose sight of the original purpose that you had set for the meeting. Also, remember to be genuine, don't position yourself as someone you are not.

Sustaining the relationship

All relationships require nurturing. The most successful networkers set aside time in their schedules for networking activities. Depending on the connection, this might mean weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annual touchpoints where you share updates. Think of ways that you can continue to add value to the relationship.

Keep in mind that for some connections, the value may be primarily in the initial meeting. There may not be a need to maintain the relationship, and that's ok. Be strategic about the relationships that you are sustaining. For the others, thank the individual for their time and don't feel the need to create a contrived way to keep in touch.

It's time to get started

If networking has been on the backburner for you, it's never too late to begin. Get the engine started with the connections that are most familiar such as former colleagues, school alumni, or the members of any associations to which you belong. Create a plan to work towards that is realistic for you.

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Fears around networking holding you back? A common fear is that people won't help you, but rejection is far less common than you think. After all, you would likely help others who reach out to you. Many people have gotten to where they are through networking, so they understand the value that it brings and are ready to pay it forward.

Networking meetings can feel uncomfortable, especially when you begin. Networking is a skill, and, over time, the more you network, the more

natural it will become. Start by practicing with your inner circle. If you are willing to give as well as receive, you can create a much more meaningful exchange.

As you gain different perspectives, you can become more strategic about managing towards your professional goals and take over the driver's seat of your career. You will know when you become a great networker when people reach out to you for guidance to help them grow and shape their careers.

Are you looking for ways to increase the retention of top talent inside your organization? Help your high performers envision what a career within your company would look like with our career management support. [Get in touch with us](#) to learn more.

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