

# **b**usiness A MAGAZINE FOR THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY ISSUE 121 AUGUST 2011 **ex**ecutive

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## LEADING IN TURBULENT TIMES

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## SPECIAL FEATURE

# Make your own luck – nurture your network

**Judith Perle** knows a thing or two about networking



SHUTTERSTOCK/ANAVA

**JUDITH PERLE**

a director of Management Advantage, which specialises in teaching communication skills. She is a graduate of London Business School.

**A**cademics aren't known for easily reaching consensus. Yet researchers from top institutions around the world agree on at least one thing: building a strong network is one of the keys to success in business. And they make their point clearly and forcefully. According to an article from the MIT Sloan School of Management:

"What really distinguishes high performers from the rest of the pack is their ability to maintain and leverage personal networks. The most effective [high performers] create and tap large, diversified networks that are rich in experience and span all organisational boundaries."

Other experts on leadership and professional development at INSEAD business school say in the prestigious *Harvard Business Review*:

"We have seen over and over again that people who work

at networking can learn not only how to do it well but also how to enjoy it. And they tend to be more successful in their careers."

This unusual level of academic agreement, asks: "Why?" The answer might run something like this: "Networking is so important because it can help us in almost every single aspect of our professional (and most probably personal) lives."

Our effort has been to find ways of networking more effectively and, crucially, getting people to feel more comfortable doing so. There is abundant research, and masses of case studies to back this up. In business, hard facts are important.

It's one thing knowing, in your head, that you ought to network if you want a fulfilled and successful career. But sometimes it's easier to be motivated when you hear a real life story. Here is one of many anecdotes.

## A visit to the opera pays off

Kay, an MBA student at London Business School, told us the following story:

"I used to work in London for two real estate investment management firms in business development and marketing. A couple of years ago, I was at an industry conference in Vienna. At the time I was working for a start-up firm and got chatting to Anne, who was a director of business development for a large global firm – right at the other end of the spectrum of my industry.

"We discovered that, as well as having a lot in common professionally, we were both interested in art and culture, and were keen to see more of the city of Vienna. Anne told me that she planned to spend the weekend after the conference exploring. We exchanged ideas about other things to see. We ran into each other again the next day, both having left the conference early.

"Nearly eight months later I was at a cocktail party in London hosted by the same association that had run the conference in Vienna. The start-up I was working for was failing and the office was being shut; I was to be working there for just one more week. My company (and its imminent demise) was the topic of many conversations, and I was speaking to a lot of people about what was going on. As the evening was coming to an end, I spotted Anne and asked her if she had enjoyed her weekend in Vienna and the opera. She immediately thanked me for my advice and we got talking. When she learned that my employer had fallen apart, she invited me to lunch the following week...and offered me a job working for her several weeks later."



This case study is a nice example of how valuable chance encounters can be. By no stretch of the imagination can each and every conversation you have bring huge benefits in its wake. But if you aren't willing (or able) to have those conversations, you're going to miss out on lots of opportunities (and, probably, lots of fun too).

Kay decided to fully engage Anne in conversation when they first met. She could have made polite small talk about real estate and left it at that, as so many people do. Kay and Anne didn't become best friends, but they listened and learned a lot about each other through just one conversation and another chance encounter.

Then see where that casual conversation led. Not immediately but later, when Kay really needed help. Just luck, chance, providence...? Or keeping one's eyes and ears open, engaged and receptive to the power of your network?

### THE RULES OF THE GAME

What exactly is this 'networking' thing, and what are the rules of the game?

A good networker builds relationships with a wide variety of different people. Some become close friends, others remain more pragmatic professional contacts; still others never get beyond the 'acquaintanceship' stage. Crucially, networking isn't about just 'working a room' so you can give your business card to anyone who will take it. In fact, a lot of networking takes place far away from networking events – at the water cooler, between parents picking up their children from school, at conferences. Kay and Anne weren't close friends, but they did manage to build up a good level of rapport in their encounters.

Networking should be about giving rather than getting. We all know people who only contact us when they want something, and who only value us in terms of what we can (or might) give them. And we all also know how (un)popular characters like that are. So don't try to manipulate people to get what you want out of them. When Kay and Anne exchanged information, neither was thinking about a job in the future or hiring staff. Yet in the end both benefited – Kay by getting a job when she needed one; Anne by finding a new member of the team without expensive advertisements or time-consuming interviews.

There's also a world of difference between networking and selling; networking is about opening doors, keeping them open and seeing where they lead. Selling is about 'closing'. There are similarities in the techniques involved, and effective networking can undoubtedly help you make sales and win business. But if you're seen to be selling, people are likely to slam that open door in your face...hard.

The very best networkers keep an open mind – about who they're talking to, why they're talking to them, and what they might hope to gain. Becoming a better networker involves, first and foremost, a change of attitude.

To do this effectively, though, your social skills may need a bit of polishing. The skills challenges that each of us face will be different. Some people find it hard to start up conversations; others run out of things to say, or can't develop rapport with the person they're talking to. Some people are fine in face-to-face situations, but find the

telephone a real challenge, whether they are making initial calls to set up a meeting, or following up on a past meeting. Everybody could do with a reminder about following up. It is so important to make contact quickly and effectively after an initial meeting or phone call. Relationships aren't created overnight; they take time to develop, and trust needs to be built up brick by brick. But all of you already know what to do. Networking is basically what our mums taught us: be nice to people and they'll probably be nice to you.

Networking is about people. Talking to people, helping people, getting involved in their lives and, ultimately, also reaping the rewards that those relationships can bring.

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There are psychological differences between people who think of themselves as unusually lucky (or unlucky). One of the four key principles to creating good luck is skill at creating, noticing and acting upon chance opportunities. Lucky people do this in various ways – by networking, adopting a relaxed attitude to life and by being open to new experiences.

Networking alone won't change your life. But active networking will certainly go a long way to nudging things in the right direction. ➡

### 10 tips to more effective networking

1. Make time to network - building a network takes time and effort.
2. Understand that giving is better (and often more effective) than getting.
3. Introduce people in your network to each other, so you develop a reputation as someone worth knowing.
4. Value your acquaintances and friends. You often learn new information from people on the fringes of your network.
5. Realise that you never know who knows whom; most people's networks are invisible to everybody but themselves.
6. Build relationships with people. On the whole, people help people they like. Not everybody has to be your best friend, but there has to be at least some fellow-feeling.
7. Stay in touch with contacts, and try not to let relationships wither away.
8. Don't hide behind your desk, but make a point of chatting to people in the workplace, so that your name stays front of mind.
9. Get out and about to raise your profile so that people know who you are.
10. Practice, practice, practice. The only way to get better at networking, and to reap the benefits, is to get out and do it.

### Book offer

Judith Perle and Tony Newton's new book *The Network Effect* will teach you more about how to network. It's available from Amazon, or direct from the publishers via [www.TheNetworkEffect.co.uk](http://www.TheNetworkEffect.co.uk) - quote discount code tnel0 to get a 10% reduction off the cover price.

