By Gwen Rhys of Networking Culture

Give yourself a
competitive
edge

…invest in your social capital

Discover:

- Reasons why networking is a critical competency

- The 5 Key Characteristics of an effective networker

- How to build your network

Managers today juggle more responsibilities than ever and for many networking becomes an afterthought, says Hermania Ibarra (INSEAD Professor of Organisational Behaviour). This, she believes, is a potentially fatal career mistake and warns that those who neglect to build their networks risk failing or remaining stuck in middle management.

In his book, Never Eat Alone, Keith Ferazzi (a former CMO of Deloitte Consulting), recalls how when working as a teenager at his local golf club in America's mid-west, he noticed that businessmen used personal relationships for mutual benefit. Poverty, he realised, wasn't only a lack of financial resources; it was isolation from the kind of people (social capital) that could help you make more of yourself. Ferazzi was witnessing "networking" in action.

In other words, **networking** increases social capital which in turn **gives business leaders an edge.**

Changing the perception of networking
Despite the strong case for being well-networked, networking is an activity that's surrounded by negative connotations.

When running seminars I ask people to describe a "typical networker". They respond with words such as supercilious, working the room, pumping flesh, insincere and the old chestnut 'not very British'.

Yet when asked to describe someone who's good at building and nurturing relationships, these phrases emerge: puts people at ease, able to talk to anyone, always cheerful, remembers the little things, has charisma, keeps in touch.

By re-framing networking as the **process of building, nurturing and leveraging relationships to maximise opportunities** makes it becomes a more positive and structured activity.

Becoming an effective networker –
The 5 Key Characteristics
What is it that makes some people more effective networkers than others? What behaviours do they demonstrate; what are the values that underpin these behaviours and why are they important?

Having worked with hundreds of individuals, helping them to network more effectively, I have identified 5 Key Characteristics consistently displayed by effective networkers.

1 Are highly curious – effective networkers have wide-ranging interests and enjoy interacting with different people. They constantly reach out beyond their comfort zones and because of their broad knowledge can find something that connects them with and to others in a meaningful way.

2 Feel enriched through meeting others – having reached out, effective networkers believe that interacting with others makes their lives more meaningful, enables them to maximise each connection and build a rich network that has both breadth (people from a variety of backgrounds) and depth (strong relationships).

3 Make links and connections between people, concepts and organisations – effective networkers like to be at the "core" of their personal network. They are the people who always "know someone who…" and are happy to connect people. In fact they enjoy doing this because it gives them the opportunity to reconnect with those in their network.

They also understand how people and ideas can be brought together for mutual and organisational benefit. Ibarra describes this ability as "a critical competency… the ability to manage relationships across boundaries and to sell ideas".

4 Keep channels of communication open – effective networkers never metaphorically close the door on a relationship, they are at pains to keep it ajar so that they can easily reconnect if and when the need arises.

5 Are positive – effective networkers know that no-one wants to connect with miserable people!

Do men and women network differently?
Yes! Women are great at the building and nurturing part of my definition of networking. Where they differ dramatically from men is in their ability to leverage their contacts. Men do this when the "tie" (strength of relationship) is weak, but women often believe this is inappropriate and fail to use their network to best advantage. Just as men expect women to "brag" about their abilities, they expect them to "leverage" their relationships. If you want something, ask and ask sooner than later.

Network effectively when time is scarce

"I don't have the time" is a common excuse for not networking. In today's world you don't have the luxury NOT to network! However, when time is at a premium, use it efficiently and effectively.

Before you rush out and sign up for lots of networking "events", remember that networking is first and foremost about building and nurturing relationships and that's best done one-on-one and if you're working within a large organisation, there are plenty of people internally you need bring into your network. Always think quality of relationships before number of relationships.

The next thing is to consider the reasons why you want to network. Is it to make everyday tasks easier (operational networking)? Is it to enhance your professional development, source information and make referrals (professional networking) or is it about future priorities and getting support from stakeholders (strategic networking)?

Understanding your reasons will lead to more effective time management; it will help you become more focused about the people you need to connect with and ultimately it will lead to more successful outcomes.

Tips and tools to help you succeed:

- **Make sure that networking is part of your everyday life** – set aside specific time to network and set yourself some networking goals – eg that you will connect or re-connect with, say, 4 people a day. In a working month that's nearly 100 people.
- **Be interested and interesting** – keep learning and be valuable to others in your network
- **Built rapport, gain trust, add value** – a networking mantra that never fails. When you meet someone for the first time, find something that you have in common (preferably not work related) quickly. Make sure you action any tasks or promises in a timely fashion. Finally, give your contacts something they don't have and this will ensure you're a valuable connection for them.

Importantly, remember that networking isn't so much about whom you know as who knows you; less about working the room than being in the right room and it's the quality not quantity of relationships that really counts.

The three types of networking

	Operational	Personal	Strategic
Purpose	Getting work done efficiently, maintaining the capacities and functions required of the group.	Enhancing personal and professional development, providing referrals to useful information and contacts.	Figuring out future priorities and challenges, getting support for them from stakeholders.
Location/ Orientation	Contacts are mostly internal and oriented toward current demands.	Contacts are mostly external and oriented toward current interests and future potential interests	Contacts are internal and external and oriented towards the future
People and Recruitment	Key contacts are relatively nondiscretionary; they are prescribed mostly by the task and organisational structure, so it is very clear who is relevant.	Key contacts are mostly discretionary, it is not always clear who is relevant.	Key contacts follow from the strategic context and the organisational environment, but specific membership is discretionary. It is not always clear who is relevant.
Network attributes	Depth	Breadth	Leverage
Behaviours	Building strong working relationships.	Reaching out to contacts.	Creating inside-outside links.