

Networking: Science or Art

Article by [Tom Talbot](#)

Networking, to many, means meeting people at business events, with the aim of finding someone who needs what you are selling and maybe offer you a position, or work project, Yet this is only part of the networking arena. Whilst statistics are difficult to pin down, it is generally accepted in the consultancy sector that more work is generated from people who know you and referrals, than any other method. Within a corporate environment, opportunities for exciting projects and job vacancies aren't always advertised, and can be filled from people who are known. Effective networking can help you raise your profile and build relationships with other people, other businesses and other organisations.

Yet there are no secrets to networking, no mystique known only to a chosen few. Just an approach and some core rules that all of us can adapt to our natural style and become successful networkers

- **The Approach**

The first step is to change how we think of networking. In South Tyneside, networking champion Gordon Hanna of Tedco, explains networking as being about, "connecting people with similar interests for the purpose of uncovering opportunities, increasing knowledge and sharing information. It is getting to know people and building relationships."

Then every event becomes an opportunity to add to your 'network' and makes the whole event much more fun and enjoyable. Our conversations then have the purpose of meeting new and interesting people to add to the group. We are trying to know and understand more about them and what's important to them. This sharing of knowledge helps you discover how you may be able to help each other.

It is possible that you can't help but 'you know a person who can'. It's your understanding of the people in your network that allows you to connect two people together, one able to help another. This is at the heart of successful networking, being able to give and take, it's a two way process.

Successful networkers believe that eventually, the effort and assistance they give to their contacts will be reciprocated. It might not flow from the person you helped, but the bigger the group, the more diverse the group, then the more likely it is that someone in the group will be able to help,

"Successful networking is not just about seeking direct work opportunities. It's about meeting new, interesting people". Your network extends beyond the formal confines of business. When we think about those opportunities to meet interesting people, then the lunch queue and the coffee shop become more than just places to wait. When you consider all of the contacts you have in your personal life. You can lose touch with colleagues as a consequence of not maintaining your network. With so much focus on developing new contacts, it is easy to forget the need to keep in touch with those you already have.

In our professional network, we might collaborate with others on projects. We may pass on work opportunities and share best practice. Attending CIPD events is one way of developing your network, although turning up to one meeting is not really much help; give people a chance to know you by being a regular even if it means dragging yourself away from the sofa and a relaxing wine just after you've got in from work

- **The Rules**

For formal events and meetings it is always wise to prepare for the meeting, simple things such as making sure you have enough business

cards and a pen that works. Identify particular people you want to meet, if you don't know them, ask the organiser for an introduction. When you are trying to decide what to wear, seek advice from those who have been before. It is always wise to dress 'up' and not 'down' for an event. For the men, wearing a suit and tie can become casual just by taking off a tie. It could be difficult to feel comfortable if everyone else is wearing business suits and you've turned up in 'chinos' and a 'check shirt'. Women have a range of accessories that can change an outfit in an instant. These first impressions are important and it's worth taking care over them. Wear your badge on the right lapel, so when you shake hands, it can be seen without any effort. When someone introduces themselves, repeat their name, it helps commit to memory.

Resisting the temptation to attack the buffet gives you an opportunity to survey the room looking for those people you want to meet. Then unhindered by balancing a plate and a coffee cup, you can join in the conversations when people are at their most relaxed and groups have not closed ranks on outsiders. If you feel the need to eat something, only put three or four bite size items on your plate at any one time. It then becomes a good reason to leave a group when the conversation dries up.

Of course, all this effort can be undone with the first question. Avoid the inevitable 'what do you do?' question; after all, it's a conversation you are having, not an interrogation. Prepare by reading the daily papers for current affairs and read the trade press to make sure you are up to date with industry developments. On a personal level, you could begin by asking about their current project, or are they looking for anything in particular out of the event.

Less threatening, and potentially more productive as a starter, is to discuss something that's not work related. Something that you're interested in, the football, even a recent film you've seen. Importantly, be interested in them; listen carefully to the other person in

the conversation. Focus on them and prevent your eye wandering over the shoulder looking for someone you know

When it comes to you, be yourself, this is not a time to be anything other than open. Recognise that not every conversation will welcome you with open arms. It helps to be conscious to verbal and non verbal clues about how you are being received. This is important when joining a group and engaging in the conversation. If it's not working for you then move on. The room is full of interesting people to talk to, and moving on is part of the process.

One tip here is to save any long, in depth conversations for another day. These give a real opportunity to reinforce the relationship by meeting up one to one after the event. Suggest meeting over a coffee, before suggesting lunch; time for a coffee is less intrusive and easier to agree to than a precious lunch break.

Business cards are vital tools; each time you meet someone, swap a card. When you leave the conversation, take a couple of minutes to write short notes on the back of their card. It is more important that you have their details, than they have yours. This way, you can contact them again, without waiting for that first contact that may not come. A helpful tip is to put the completed cards in a different pocket. This stops the embarrassment of a card shuffle searching for the next card to use.

After the event, keep your promise by contacting those you said you would. File the cards of those who could be useful, and get rid of those cards that will just add volume without any potential future connection.

Networking should become a way of life and it takes time to build meaningful network. Nurture your network and it will grow, ignore it and it will decline and fade. Every time you meet an interesting person is an opportunity to build your network. You meet people at work, at lunch, at coffee, at play, when you're travelling. Make a start today and talk to someone you don't know.

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