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Further than Figures

Power Networking

Develop effective networking skills to put the concept of six degrees of separation to work for your career.

FROM: MAY-JUN 2004 ISSUE | BY MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

Sasha Jones, a student in the CGA program, was enjoying an afternoon cappuccino in a café in Italy when an elderly gentleman at the next table leaned over. "I see from the flag on your knapsack that you're from Canada," he said. Sasha smiled and told him she was from Regina. "This may be a silly question, but I have an old friend, Vittorio Rossi, who owns a small supermarket in Saskatoon. You don't by chance know him?" he asked. Surprised, Sasha responded, "He's my best friend's father!" The elderly gentleman beamed and shook his head.

This type of scenario, while surprising, is not as uncommon as you might expect. In fact, you have probably encountered a situation where you discovered that you shared an unlikely mutual acquaintance with someone. This phenomenon is known as the "small-world problem," and was first investigated by psychologist Stanley Milgram. In his classic 1967 study, he demonstrated the power of networks between people. This concept forms the foundation of business networking today.

Understanding networking

Many people think business networking is simply making acquaintances over pleasant conversation at a conference or social gathering. Others limit networking to an exchange of business cards. But true networking is much more than that. It's developing *long-term relationships* for *reciprocal benefit* with people who can help you in your career; people who can give you information, leads, contacts, and ideas. Reciprocity means that while you are benefiting, you are also seeking to help others in their careers by sharing information, ideas, and knowledge with them.

No matter what business environment you work in, networking can help you become more successful in your career. Whether you're looking for a new job, seeking new clients, or just trying to get information on a subject that you are not familiar with, a network of contacts will make the challenge much easier.

The small-world problem

Let's go back to Milgram's study for more on why business networking is so successful. In an experiment he first reported in May 1967, Milgram reasoned that a person could reach anyone by linking up with people in their extended networks. He put his theory to the test by asking 150 randomly selected people (starters) from Omaha, Nebraska, and Wichita, Kansas, to deliver a package to a specific person (target) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by using a network of personal acquaintances. He discovered that on average, it took five to six intermediary transactions to get the package from the starter to the target; the range was from two to ten. In fact, the term "six degrees of separation" was coined from the results of this study.

Developing networking skills

A fundamental concept in networking is to seek to reciprocate *before* you seek to benefit. To do this, you have to master two skills — the art of asking open-ended questions, and the art of listening. Open-ended questions are those that require more than a yes or no answer. And when you listen actively, you are positioned to understand how you can be of assistance. In addition to good questioning and listening, it is also important to develop one or more areas of excellence so that you can be a source to others.

Building your network

There will be many times in your professional and personal life when you will need to draw upon your network for information, knowledge, or other resources. Here are three approaches to consider:

1. Go directly to your network.
2. Leverage your existing network.
3. Use organizational meetings and conferences to build your network.

Here's an example to demonstrate these approaches. At times, I am asked by clients to develop a program on a topic that is not directly within my scope of expertise. When this happened recently, I went directly to my network and called a colleague who I knew delivered programs on the subject. He wasn't available for the requested date, so I leveraged my network by asking him for the names of people in his network. When his contacts were not available, I used the third approach.

As a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers, I attend monthly meetings. At a recent meeting, I asked open-ended questions and listened actively to find someone who could deliver the requested program by the client's deadline. This is where I finally struck gold and was able to put a qualified speaker in touch with my client. While I did not receive an immediate advantage, I know that I will benefit in the future from my business networking with these individuals.

Ensuring diversity

As you seek to develop your network, think also about building diversity into it by searching out the following four types of people:

- **Role models**
— people you emulate either consciously or unconsciously because they have qualities, styles, or abilities you admire.
- **Mentors**
— people who teach, coach, and advise you.
- **Sponsors**
— people who serve as your public relations department; your "door openers" who wield power and influence in recommending you for opportunities by saying positive things about you to others.
- **Challengers**
— people who are the human equivalent of sandpaper, as they force you to reconsider your ideas and attitudes. They may rub you the wrong way; however, they stimulate your thinking.

Remember that successful networking results from deliberate effort and learned proficiency. Invest energy in

developing your network; it will pay dividends in new jobs, new clients, new information, and new ideas. And keep in mind that networking is not friendly social dialogue without a specific purpose, nor is it a matter of luck or chance. Done right, it will increase the power of your network.

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