

The CONNECTED

Employee:

The 8 Networking Competencies for Organizational Success

By Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon

In our plugged-in world, it might seem that the need for face-to-face networking skills is obsolete. Not so. Designing an enterprisewide strategy for teaching these skills and helping employees manage their social capital can and does benefit the bottom line.

Karen stops by to see Juanita and says, "Are you coming to the women's network meeting?"

Jim needs to put together a quick response to his manager's request for bids from three vendors for the employee survey.

Don gets to the office a few minutes early. Waiting for the elevator, he's preoccupied with thoughts about his first meeting of the day. As the elevator arrives, he turns and realizes that standing right behind him is the brand new CEO.

These scenarios are networking choice points. What employees do and say at these and thousands of other junctures reflects their level of skill in relationship-building and their ability to contribute to the success of the organization. An enterprisewide networking competency initiative to encourage employees to connect will enable organizations to see results in a variety of areas that can impact the bottom line.

Defining “unconnected employees”
“Unconnected employees” do not have the skills necessary to create, cultivate, and capitalize on face-to-face relationships. There are more of these people than you might at first imagine.

The unconnected may be

- introverts, who comprise about half of the U.S. population; they say things such as, “I do a good job. Why do I have to network?”
- people who have chosen careers in what have traditionally been thought of as “behind-the-scenes” jobs, such as engineering, IT, research, finance, and science
- people who classify themselves as “shy”—in 1972, when the Stanford Shyness Clinic began, that number was 40 percent; now it’s almost 60 percent. So shyness is a growing problem. Interestingly, the youngest generation—the most plugged-in generation ever—is the shyest
- employees thrown together in new ways after mergers or acquisitions
- new hires who get off to a slow start
- people whose networks have been disrupted by layoffs or reorganizations
- international employees who are unfamiliar, and uncomfortable, with U.S.-style relationship-building
- employees from diverse backgrounds who find it difficult to feel included and appreciated.

For 18 months, we asked workshop participants, “Do you have the network you need?” Only 15 to 20 percent say, “Yes.” Interestingly, that number tracks closely with the number of employees classified as “engaged.”

However they come to merit the title of “unconnected,” employees can learn relationship-building skills. Introverts appreciate having formulas and systems; shy people see that skills can help them become more comfortable and confident; internationals are relieved to know the rules; and the 15 to 20 percent who are “natural networkers” are gratified to confirm and clarify what they have figured out intuitively.

Making networking a priority

Organizational attitudes toward networking range from unaware, to discouraging, to encouraging, to mandatory. Some people assume that networking skills cannot be taught, or classify networking as a “soft skill,” and therefore less of a contributor to the bottom line. Others see it as a career advancement skill rather than a competency that boosts organizational outcomes. Most organizations have been slow to place a high priority on establishing an enterprisewide strategy for building networking competency.

But now, respected sources are touting the value of this overlooked and underestimated skill set. Two examples from a collection of dozens make the point. “Developing Business Leaders for 2010,” a report from The Conference Board, states that “one of the four key essential leadership roles is relationship/network builder.” An article in MIT Sloan Management Review (“The Social Side of Performance”) says, “What really distinguishes high performers from the rest of the pack is their ability to maintain and leverage personal networks. The most effective create and tap large, diversified networks that are rich in experience and span all organizational boundaries.”

Not only are academicians and researchers calling for attention to network-building, corporate and government leaders have also joined the hue and cry. They are calling for outcomes that require silo smashing and collaborating across functions. Two examples indicate the C-level interest. At one Fortune 500 company, four out of five leadership imperatives mention

relationship-building. An entrance requirement for the Senior Executive Service—the U.S. government’s top ranking jobs—includes “develop an expansive professional network.” Yet even with these kinds of pronouncements from the top, obstacles stand in the way of action.

Overcoming the obstacles

First, the terminology is confusing. Some 20 years ago, when we began considering the role of networking skills in the workplace, networking was pigeonholed as a sales skill or a job-hunting tactic. The term “networking” still carries some of that baggage. And although the idea of networking is emerging as a serious topic, it may appear under an alias. Organizations call it by many other names—relationship management, social acumen, connectivity, horizontal integration, and social capital, for example. This tempest in a terminological teapot has confused the issue and made it hard for a clear “territory” to be defined.

Second, ubiquitous communication technologies mask the need for networking competency. With 24/7 connectivity maintained by a host of devices, it’s hard to imagine that people are unconnected. In our plugged-in world, it might appear that the need for face-to-face networking is obsolete, or at least minimized. This simply is not the case.

According to MIT professor Alex Pentland in “How Social Networks Network Best,” employees in one organization, with the most extensive personal digital networks, were 7 percent more productive. However, employees with the most cohesive face-to-face networks were 30 percent more productive. Pentland points out that electronic tools can help people to discover information, but face-to-face communication best supports the integration of that information.



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The 8 Networking Competencies

1 | Capitalize on style. Appreciating how personality (introversion, extroversion, communication styles, and shyness) and mindset (previous learnings, attitudes, and misconceptions) affect the ability to build relationships. Be able to

- identify personal style
- clarify attitudes toward networking
- reframe networking as teaching and giving
- adopt leading-edge beliefs about the critical role of networking in the marketplace.

2 | Take a strategic approach. Targeting specific organizational and career outcomes (macro) and agenda-building for specific networking events and encounters (micro). Be able to

- make informed choices about how to focus attention, time, and money
- adapt and apply the tools of networking to
 - get on board quickly, get the job done, get the business, and get ahead
 - get behind organizational initiatives
 - get the most out of meetings and conferences
- plan agendas to achieve maximum value from events/encounters.

3 | Envision the ideal network. Identifying WorkNet, OrgNet, ProNet, and LifeNet contacts and appreciating the benefits, challenges, and leveraging opportunities faced in developing them. Be able to

- correctly locate any contact in the appropriate Net
- map WorkNet and OrgNet contacts
- use criteria to evaluate relationships and sort them into categories
- plan structured next-step conversations
- leverage opportunities from one Net to another.

4 | Develop relationships. Seeing relationship development in six stages and managing the trust-building process by teaching character and competence. Be able to

- use criteria to determine the stage of any relationship
- survey and evaluate options for demonstrating character and competence
- know how trust is broken and how to reestablish it
- determine what to teach and learn if you want a better relationship
- initiate and manage the six follow-through conversations.

5 | Increase social acumen. Becoming more comfortable, confident, and professional by mastering relationship rituals. Be able to

- make your name memorable
- learn names using specific techniques
- deal with forgotten names in a way that builds the relationship
- know the best times to exchange business cards and how to use them
- easily join groups of people who are already talking
- use specific methods to end conversations with the future in mind
- handle awkward moments.

6 | Showcase expertise. Using examples and stories to teach contacts about expertise, experience, talents, and interests. Be able to

- answer the question, “What do you do?” to make expertise visible and memorable
- call to mind, identify, and research events and successes
- use guidelines to construct and edit stories that highlight what you want to teach
- recognize storytelling opportunities
- deliver stories in a way that increases personal and organizational visibility.

7 | Assess opportunities. Choosing optimum networking opportunities and making participation pay off. Be able to

- analyze and select networking venues to reflect your goals
- decide if a specific group meets your needs
- outline participation and plan how to get the most from time and money spent
- decide when to discontinue memberships
- create a customized group to generate referrals and find resources
- seek out and plan how to take advantage of internal networking opportunities.

8 | Deliver value. Contributing to the organization’s networking culture and capitalizing on networking to affect the bottom line. Be able to

- ask questions designed to learn about others and develop relationships
- listen generously with a bias toward action
- be alert for opportunities to connect your contacts and provide access to resources, talent, and opportunities
- increase the return-on-investment by bringing back business intelligence from conferences and meetings
- encourage and support (model and mentor) a networking culture throughout the organization.

Technology is best seen as a complement to, not a substitute for, direct contact. Social networking software certainly can make individual employee expertise more visible and accessible. But ideally, more should be done with it.

The social networking system could include imbedded “just-in-time” or “just enough” face-to-face skill-building tips. For example, a new hire creating his profile could be asked, “Want tips on teaching your name?” One click would take him to a short tutorial on that topic. Or an employee accessing an expense report form before going to a conference or meeting could be offered an article on how to network to make valuable contacts and bring back business intelligence, ensuring that her attendance is worth the organization’s time and money.

Focusing on bottom-line benefits

A third obstacle that has slowed acceptance of the need for an enterprisewide networking initiative is that research substantiating the bottom-line benefits has not been pulled together. This research has originated in many disciplines and appears under many key words. Often, however, “networking” is not mentioned. So it’s not surprising that organizational leaders, who don’t have the time to review academic and business literature, are unaware of the benefits that can result from connecting employees.

Pick up an issue of any premier academic journal. If you look very carefully, you’ll almost always find at least one article citing research with implications for face-to-face networking. For example, in “Restoring American Competitiveness,” published in the *Harvard Business Review*, the authors make the case for “commons,” or proximity of organizations (think Silicon Valley or Research Triangle). They go on to cite research on knowledge flows by Lee Fleming, showing that “...much technical knowledge, even in hard sciences, is highly tacit and therefore far more effectively transmitted face-to-face.”

Other research ties proficiency in networking (by whatever name) to other key organizational concerns. Here are just a few examples:

- better management: “Successful managers network 70 percent more than their less successful counterparts.” (“A Social Capital Theory of Career Success” by Scott E. Seibert, Maria L. Kraimer, and Robert C. Liden, *Academy of Management Journal*, April 2001)
- improved decision making: “The significant difference between high quality and poor quality decisions is how the decision-makers engage stakeholders.” (“What You Don’t Know About Making Decisions” by David A Garvin and Michael A. Roberto, *Harvard Business Review*, September 2001)
- orientation: “Companies that are more successful at rapid onboarding tend to use a relational approach, helping newcomers to rapidly establish a broad network of relationships with co-workers that they can tap to obtain the information they need to become productive.” (“Getting New Hires Up to Speed Quickly,” Keith Rollag, Rob Cross, Salvatore Parise, *MIT Sloan Management Review*, January 2005)
- business development: “For 35 consulting engineers located at client sites, 30 percent of their bonuses was tied to bringing in new or additional business; only 3 received that money.” (Contacts Count Research)
- increased innovation and creativity: “Organizations that foster community achieve shorter technology-cycle times.” (“The New Task of R&D Management: Creating Goal-Directed Communities for Innovation,” by William Q. Judge, Gerald E. Fryxell, and Robert S. Dooley, *California Management Review*, Spring 1997)
- recruitment: “Programs that encourage employees to recruit others suffer from lack of participation, no matter how much bonus money is offered.” (“Social Network Recruiting” by Jennifer C. Berkshire, *HR Magazine*, April 2005)

- learning: “70 percent of what people know about their jobs they learn through everyday interactions with colleagues.” (“The Teaching Firm: Where Productive Work and Learning Converge,” Center for Workforce Development, Education Development Center, 1998)
- retention: “People who have a friend at work are 7 times more likely to stay.” (*Vital Friends*, by Tom Rath, Gallup Press, 2006).

And the research cited here is just the tip of a huge iceberg. A comprehensive review of the literature would require a book, or several.

Getting started

The fourth obstacle is that it’s not obvious who should be leading the charge. There are many stakeholders whose efforts will benefit if employees improve their networking skills. Stakeholders include those people involved with training, talent management, organizational development, recruitment, orientation, leadership development, employee and career development, business development, mentoring, diversity initiatives, employee alumni networks, and social networking software.

Any of the leaders who stand to gain from increased networking competency can issue an invitation for the conversation to begin. At the stakeholders’ summit meeting, it most certainly will become clear that efforts are already going on in many areas.

In the orientation program, new hires may be advised to build their networks. IT and HR may be making decisions about social networking software. In the Employee Resource Groups and mentoring programs, participants may even receive some training. As stakeholders inventory and assess existing efforts and programs, they will be able to develop a baseline for enterprisewide action.

It is clear that a strategy for managing social capital is needed. In a recent webinar poll, HR professionals were asked if they saw a need to strategically manage the creation, maintenance, and growth of social capital in their organizations. “Yes,” said 91 percent. Then they

were asked if their organizations have a well-defined, enterprisewide strategy for developing the social capital of employees. “No,” said 81 percent.

Outlining the competencies

The final obstacle to progress toward a well-networked organization is that networking competencies have not, until now, been defined and articulated. The eight competencies proposed here have been field-tested in orientation, leadership development, employee development, career development, diversity, and business development training programs for corporate, academic, and government organizations.

The eight competencies reflect a comprehensive body of knowledge that gives unconnected employees skills that they can immediately put to use in the service of business and career goals. The competencies range from “increase social acumen,” to “showcase expertise,” to “deliver value.” They

- reframe and refocus networking on bottom-line benefits
- apply to most levels and job types
- create value in both internal and external settings
- easily translate into objectives for training on specific and measurable behaviors.

Organizations that make networking competency a priority will reap the benefits from employees who know how to get on board quickly, get ahead, get the job done, get the business, get the most out of professional connections at meetings and conferences, and get behind organizational initiatives.

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