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Introduction

Networking is a process undertaken with the intent of developing and sustaining relationships with those who have the prospective ability to assist in one's career or personal goals [1, 2]. It requires active behavior, which often includes the nurturing of networks both inside and outside one's home institution. While the concept of networking originated in the business world, its benefits extend well beyond it. Indeed, companies in the technological and research fields have come increasingly to rely on networking to find success in today's world [3, 4].

There are many benefits to engaging in effective networking. Much of the literature suggests that networking activity is indispensable to a successful career [5], and scholarly research has reinforced the reality that networking is positively related to objective and subjective measures of career success [6, 7]. Most crucially, one will often see the creation of new projects, find a mentor, and gain access to career advancement [6–11]. Indeed, the task of networking can be a key overall to raising one's career prospects [11–16]. It is clear that people are more likely to recommend, employ, and support projects of people with whom they are personally familiar [14, 16, 17].

One hypothesis has been devised that identifies three skills as being predictors of career advancement: “knowing why,” “knowing whom,” and “knowing how” [18]. The skill most relevant and directly related to networking is the “Knowing whom.” Under this hypothesis, there are two crucial types of networks that will improve one's career development: one's developmental network (including mentoring), and the extensiveness of one's network both internal and external to an institution. The key advantages that come from “knowing whom” is that the sources you cultivate

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will provide wisdom, guidance, reputation, advancement, and knowledge. “Knowing whom” also grants important access to additional contacts and potentially career opportunities.

Some benefits of networking can seem less tangible but are no less important. For instance, networking can lead to new acquaintances and friends who will provide valuable sources of emotional support. According to the longitudinal social network analysis over 20 years in the Framingham Heart Study, happiness is very often found through support networks, especially as one’s network extends out through a variety of social areas [19]. Put simply, “people’s happiness depends on the happiness of others with whom they are connected.” These kinds of connections are very often found through networking.

While the practice of networking is most heavily emphasized and relied upon when one is looking for employment opportunities, it is no less important as a method for continued success and advancement in one’s current position. Networking involves making meaningful contacts that are enduring, and such contacts can be found in almost any context that provides interaction with colleagues.

Types of Networks

There are several different types of networks, each of which offers various opportunities to individuals. The type of network to pursue, develop, and sustain will depend heavily on one’s goals.

Personal Networks

In the first instance, a great place to start with networking is through one’s personal community. This includes members of one’s family, friends, and other people within the immediate local community. Such contacts are often a primary tool in enhancing one’s career prospects and are the starting point for forming a larger network [2, 20]. While people have very different levels of access to influential contacts, for many people it is true that those already within their circle can be extremely helpful in searching for new opportunities [21].

Academic Networks

While not everyone has access to high-powered or influential connections in their personal lives, such contacts can often be found in one’s academic career. Relationships are usually formed upon entering a university community, where both

undergraduate and postgraduate students can find new contacts within their fields of interest. This continues into residency, where trainees have the opportunity to connect with others from different specialties. By the end of one's educational experience, a network can be built of friends, peers, and colleagues who either become powerful connectors themselves or sources of information on where to locate such connections. Additionally, organizations such as alumni groups can offer networks of former students who are inclined to offer career help [22].

Transient Networks

Temporary communities are those that are encountered when we take part in events. Examples of this include conferences, seminars, and multidisciplinary tumor boards. Annual meetings organized by the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO), American College of Radiation Oncology (ACRO), and American Radium Society (ARS) are all examples of such events. Encounters like these can provide small windows of opportunity to form bonds with other participants. Often by their nature, they demand quite vigorous networking activities. A proactive, curious, and energetic attitude is essential when approaching activities in these setting [14].

Online Networks

Social media is universally used in today's world. Digital media allows communication between people with minimal effort. Such networks are widely relied upon by patients, healthcare workers, hospitals, and businesses, and they have helped both to better inform patients and to encourage innovation in the practice of healthcare. Social media enables communication instantly without regard to the barriers of geography, resources, or even language (thanks to translation software in many applications.) Clinical educators on social media, through rich peer-to-peer discussions, share the newest research advancements to enhance the practice of evidence-based medicine.

As one example of these social media platforms, LinkedIn is a site used by more than 500 million professionals to grow and interact with their professional network. Many physicians have LinkedIn accounts to promote their academic standing, network with colleagues around the world, and find possible career opportunities [23]. Indeed, even when one is not seeking employment, social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and ResearchGate, when used judiciously, can be quite valuable as a networking opportunity, as they can help to find new connections, probe additional knowledge, and raise one's own profile.

Strategies to Improve Networking Opportunities

Included here are some useful insights when it comes to improving and developing networking skills. The strategies below were drawn from sources such as business literature, medical education literature, and personal experiences.

Start with an Existing Network

To varying extents, everyone has some personal network on which to rely. This would often include mentors, colleagues, medical school classmates, and friends in other fields, both medical and nonmedical. This is often the most fertile place to begin. Friends and acquaintances can assist in connecting you with someone from their own circle and coordinate an introduction process [4, 5, 7, 10, 24]. If you know that someone in your own inner circle has a connection with a contact of interest to you, it is usually worth asking whether he or she would be willing to get in touch with them on your behalf.

Committees offer another promising opportunity to expand one's network. The work of such groups – regular attendance at meetings and collaboration on various projects – offers invaluable chances to interact with new people, both within your hospital and within the field. Indeed, finding and sustaining connections with one's own peers can be especially worthwhile, because such people will be the cohort of colleagues with whom you will ultimately spend the most time.

Use Conferences Wisely

National conferences are golden opportunities for networking. Such events are filled to the brim with fellow practitioners, future colleagues, and leaders in the field. Other than conferences, it is rare to find situations in which sizable numbers of people from across the country, and the world, are all under the same roof at the same time. This can be taken advantage of, as opportunities to network abound [15, 24]. This might involve attending an abstract presentation and speaking with the presenter, serving as a resident representative to a committee, or even simply attending preplanned events geared toward networking.

Planning ahead is a key component of conference networking. Generally, a conference's website will provide a list of attendees and presenters. One could easily review this information and make a personal list of speakers and possible attendees he/she would be interested in getting to know. This could be followed by contacting such people via email before the conference and requesting a meeting [16, 24].

Just as one would prepare for a committee meeting with clear goals in mind, so too should one have explicit desired outcomes for networking interactions. Before the meeting, it is a good practice to take the time to figure out what can be ideally

achieved from meeting a new contact. The goals don't need be complex: learning more about an aspect of the field, brainstorming a new research idea or potential collaboration, or establishing a new mentor are all realistic and worthy goals for a meeting. Flexibility is essential too [25]. Keep in mind that the conversation may go down a path very different from the one originally intended. Your contact may have his or her own intentions with the meeting, and this can be beneficial. Both personally and professionally, the most powerful relationships are built on shared goals [12].

Don't Forget to Follow Up

As simple as it sounds, the step of following up after each interaction is often forgotten but quite critical [16, 24]. Strong networking skills require following up and maintaining contacts. This can be as quick as a short email thanking the contact for taking time to meet with you and reiterating your shared interest or articulating the next steps that might be involved in a project. After the initial interaction, in order to maintain the new connection, regular contact is essential. The simplest way to keep in touch is by email.

Conclusion

Networking is a series of behaviors which one can employ toward the goal of developing and sustaining relationships with those who have the potential ability to help with one's goals both in one's career and in one's personal life. There are several types of networks, each of which offers various opportunities to individuals. The type of network to pursue, develop, and sustain will depend heavily on one's goals. It requires an active effort to seek out and harvest such connections through the networking process, and several strategies exist for doing so. By knowing the type of networking necessary, and by pursuing connections in a consistent, strategic manner, a diligent professional can turn many potential contacts into lasting friendships and academic partnerships.

Key Points

- Networking is an active process of developing and sustaining relationships with those who have the potential to assist in one's career or personal goals.
- There are several different types of networks, including personal, academic, transient, and online networks.
- Many strategies can be employed to improve and develop networking skills, such as starting with one's home network, using contact opportunities like national conferences, and remembering to follow up.

For Discussion with a Mentor or Colleague

- Which kinds of networks are best for personal goals, and which are best for professional goals?
- Do the opportunities for networking provided in a university setting help to equalize the playing field for those without extensive personal networks?
- Aside from job opportunities, what are some other specific benefits that come with having an extensive network of contacts?

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