

How to build effective, professional networks (Part II)

This resource is about maintaining a working network of professional contacts, and it follows on from Part I in this series. Engaging in network building has multiple benefits in terms of future planning and the development of self-concept, so it is worthwhile investing some time in these activities.

Keeping track of your circles

At first, your circles may feel quite manageable in an organisational system as simple as your mobile phone. Initially you will know all your colleagues pretty well, know their stories, and know their strengths and needs; however project your career out five years into the future. Now your circles may look like a juggler's hoops in flight. Maybe you attended a conference or a summer festival and met dozens of new people in a short timeframe. Some of your new contacts will be people you worked with once, others you may have met casually, still others you may work with regularly. Many of the people you have met may know other people in your various orbits, but can you work out who knows whom?

Figuring out workable systems to manage and safeguard your contacts simply and efficiently will pay big dividends as your career develops. The key is choosing systems (yes, more than one - more on that soon) that you can sustain, given your personality, lifestyle and professional needs. For some people, that contact list may be focused on a mobile phone. Other people may prefer a spreadsheet or database, or a notebook of business cards. You may also use a social media site such as LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com). Whatever you choose, be sure you have sufficient backups.

Most contact management systems fall into one of three general categories: digital, online, or hard copy. Some of these systems overlap and you will want to back up your lists of contacts in a couple of different formats. What if your computer crashes or your bag is stolen? What happens if you drop your phone in a puddle? Valuable information central to your career could be lost in a moment without careful backup, so consider developing multiple, flexible circle management systems.

Digital systems are computer-based word processing, database, or spreadsheet methods, for organising your contacts. These take some time to set up initially, but they are often fairly easy to maintain and they are especially handy to reorganise according to your needs (by name, specialty, city, or other criteria). These files are most easily retrieved if you have easy access to a computer, carry your laptop with you most of the time, or if you synchronise your smart phone with your computer. If not, you may want to consider your computer as more of a backup system and go with more portable methods. You can back up digital files with hard drives or zip drives, as well as via inexpensive Internet storage systems (such as Google Docs, iDrive, and many others) for your most valuable information; this is particularly handy when travelling. You might even consider printing important files occasionally.

Business cards never go out of style and they are an important circle building career tool. Ranging from virtually free versions available online to expensive custom-designed and printed versions, they fit easily in your wallet and they are an effective way to share your contact information (and collect that information from others). Find a simple, professional-looking design through the online providers, or if you're lucky enough to know a graphic designer, consider bartering for some design services to create a personalised look for your business card.

In general, keep the information on your business card simple as well: your name, what you do, and contact information (mobile, email, website) is usually sufficient. Opportunities to share your cards can happen any time so, keep your business cards with you at all times and not just when you're officially 'on the job.' If you are interested in paperless systems, digitise each new business card using your smart phone and store them virtually.

Other old-fashioned paper-based systems appeal to some, and can be handy and reliable as well. An address book is easy to carry in your bag, and a Rolodex or notebook can organise the business cards you collect along the way if you like the hard copy route. Just as with your digital storage, be sure to have a backup for your hard copy systems.

To summarise circle building:

- Seek out opportunities to meet new people and reconnect with long-term friends/family/colleagues.
- Build relationships for the long term (and do not burn bridges, no matter how tempting it might be sometimes).
- Be a good colleague - a strong individual who is reliable, pleasant, on time, and prepared.
- Keep your contact lists organised and accessible in more than one format.
- Explore and make use of social media in personally and professionally appropriate ways.

Remember, it is never too soon to start.

Make it count!

Remember, it is never too soon to start developing your professional network. Design and order some business cards and review your online presence - what do you find if you search for yourself online? Would you hire that person?

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