NETWORKING: A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT

Networking plays a crucial role in an academic's professional development. The reason for this is locked up in the process of taking advantage of contacts with other people for career and professional purposes. In the past the biggest misconception about networking was that it was unfair to take advantage of your personal and/or professional network to further your career. Although this has been denied by various authors, the perception remains present. The important qualities/traits needed for successful networking are confidence, initiative and comfortable interaction with other people.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Much of the focus on individual career planning has been on the development of human capital, as opposed to social capital. This human capital focus represents the investments being made in assisting academics in becoming and remaining marketable (e.g. where education, work experiences, training, knowledge, skills and abilities represent the critical sources of human capital). Social capital represents the sources available to an individual as a result of one's personal network of contacts, which is a valuable intangible asset that provides individuals with a strategic competitive advantage in their careers. Furthermore some key factors to consider when evaluating one's social capital are the size, structure, and composition of one's network. While the sheer size of a network (the number of individuals one knows) is important in developing social capital, size is less critical than the structure of a network. The more significant issue is how connected one's contacts are to one another. Although it may seem counterintuitive, Forret and Sullivan (2002:251) feels it is more beneficial from a network perspective to have contacts who *do not* know one another. Members of a network who know one another tend to have access to the same types of information, resources, and people. Thus commonly human capital is thought of as "what you know" and social capital as "who you know". This perspective results in the biggest misconception about networking, namely it is unfair to take advantage of your personal and/or professional network to further your career. In order to investigate and critically analyses this misconception, it is important to first define networking as a professional development strategy.

The first part of this article deals with conceptualizing networking as a professional development strategy. This will be followed by the different roles of academics and where networking fits in. Then guiding posts on how to start and maintain a network will be provided. The last part of the article concentrates on the different elements of networking.

2.   NETWORKING AS A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Networking plays a crucial role in an academic's professional development. In order to conceptualise this concept, it can be defined as the process of taking advantage of contacts with other people for career and professional purposes. The implication of this is that a single tangible personal connection can lead you as an academic to multiple opportunities for professional and personal growth.

Although for some professions networking is practically built into their job descriptions, it is not the case with academics. Furthermore, despite the importance of networking to career success, little guidance exists for individuals to strategically manage their networking efforts. Rather than encourage individuals to simply "engage in more networking" it is recommended as a systematic balanced scorecard approach to developing and coordinating one's networking efforts (Forret & Sullivan, 2002:251). Graham and McKenzie (1995) did a study on the development of new graduate recruits in business. An interview with one of the Training Managers summed up networking as follows:

> "*It's the ability to pick up the phone and talk on a first name basis with a contemporary in Copenhagen when your sitting in Lisbon, and a Portuguese company wants to do something up there pretty quickly. Portuguese banks are unable to help, there are no Danish banks in Portugal, so he's going to go to the intermediary. We claim that as a benefit. I don't know how you would measure it, but I don't think there are many doubts it's a benefit.   That's what this networking is for*" (Graham & McKenzie, 1995:39).

It is obvious that the specific problem and goal of networking may differ from the example given above, but the fact remains that networking is the ability to contact a person (whether this person in known to you professionally, socially or as a member of your family) whom you think can help you with a specific problem. Rowh (2002:18) pinpoints it as follows: "It's not what you know, it's who you know".   This old saying, while not entirely accurate, contains an element of truth.   When it comes to planning careers and seeking jobs, networking plays an important role and can be a key part of occupational success.   Simply put, networking is the process of taking advantage of contacts with other people for career or professional purposes.

Furthermore academics can argue "I am not good at networking".   This, however, is not a time-honoured truth, but a false modesty.   Although academics may think they do not know how to network, that's what they are doing every time engage with someone you don know well and then discover you have similar interests and ideas in common.   Thus networking as a professional development strategy needs promotion and encouragement within the academic arena.

Academic networking, as a professional development strategy, consists of individuals attempting to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career. Developing relationships is a crucial aspect of effective networking. It takes time and effort to cultivate trusting relationships that develop into one's social capital. Research has found that successful networking influences career outcomes such as increased job opportunities, job performance, income, promotions, and career satisfaction. Academic networking also provides more immediate benefits, including gaining information, visibility, career advice, friendships, social support, business leads and resources.

In addition, building a network in which there is little redundancy among the members provides a greater variety of information and access to a greater number of different individuals. Another key factor to consider in the development of one's network is composition. Having a network that is varied in terms of age, gender, racial and ethnic background, organisational level, expertise and types of organisation or affiliation represented assists an individual to extend access into different groups of people (Forret & Sullivan, 2002:251).

In addition, Rowh (2002:18) states that networking is clearly the single most important avenue to successful career planning, career choice and implementation. According to research, the majority of people who obtain good positions, did it through networking (Marmaros & Sacerdote, 2002). Another issue of importance is identifying job openings, which is often a major task, whether it implies poring over a newspaper's classified advertisements or surfing the Internet. However, it is not the only way to go. According to career experts, fewer than half of all jobs are advertised. For the others, as well as for many publicised jobs, the secret to success is networking. Given a choice between two equally qualified candidates, hiring managers will usually prefer to hire a person with whom they have had a positive experience. That is why networking is so important, because it brings you into contact with more potential hiring managers (Rowh, 2002:18). Additionally there are many reasons for networking of which the following are the most important for professional career development in an academic situation:

- Searching for a job after graduation.
- Changing between jobs.
- Promotion within a company/university.
- Research.
- Teaching and learning.
- Community service.

These reasons link with the major roles of academics in general, which will now be highlighted.

3. THE DIFFERENT ROLES OF ACADEMICS AND WHERE NETWORKING FITS IN

The focus in this section will be on networking during the main functions of an academic such as the following:

- Teaching/facilitation.
- Research.
- Community service.
- Administrative functions such as serving on a committee.

3.1 Teaching/facilitation

During the contact session there appears to be two-way building of a network between the lecturer/facilitator and learners – where learners mainly rely on the lecturer/facilitator for the transmission of knowledge, while - in turn - the lecturer/facilitator is stimulated to increase the quality of instruction (e.g. when experiencing problems in explaining a certain concept). In order to demonstrate this, for example when using the "environmental management" term, it is much easier to take learners to a mining environment to illustrate how environmental management is used in the mine. In order for this work to succeed, the lecturer has to have previous contacts with the mining industry to apply networking before conducting such an event.

3.2 Research

In general, postgraduates mainly rely on their supervisor's network in order to complete their research. Within this process, these postgraduates start building a network on their own and even contribute to this. An example of this can be a research project by the Geography Department where necessary information had to be obtained from the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT). Although the lecturer made the initial contact, it was up to the learners to continue with the contact and networking.

Similarly, higher education academics are responsible for research. Within this networking process interdisciplinary networking is crucial. Especially in a subject such as geography it is easy to do joint research with departments such as zoology, plant sciences, sociology, etc., because information at these departments can be easily obtained. Another example to illustrate this can be an article written on environmental management within the city environment. Within this context a staff member of the department of plant sciences was personally involved in studies done on this subject, and thus the person was subsequently contacted for assistance and information.

3.3 Community service

Through community service and contact with the outside world, numerous contacts can be obtained. Previous research done in the community will help

to build up contacts for the next research proposal, while previous employers and clients must also be considered.

Networking in a community can be beneficial from both a personal and a business point of view. Although one may not participate in community activities primarily for the purpose of networking, the relationships that develop often have important implications for one's career. Volunteering, promoting a personal cause (e.g. increasing literacy), participating in city boards or councils, and attending meetings of service clubs tend to broaden one's array of contacts considerably. Indeed, in this era of no boundary careers, more individuals may join voluntary organisations to regain a sense of connection formerly provided by their companies. In addition to satisfying needs for affiliation, other benefits such as new ideas and job opportunities may be derived through interaction with individuals external to one's employment higher education institution.

Some higher education institutions are actively promoting community involvement. These companies retain high quality workers who may otherwise have quitted the firm to re-evaluate their lives or recover from job burnout. Even companies without formal programmes may permit a leave of absence rather than having to hire and train a new employee. Other companies support community involvement by their members as part of being a good neighbour and showing community spirit (Forret & Sullivan, 2002:255).

3.4   Administrative functions

The following administrative functions are relevant:

3.4.1   Committee work

 Committees must be divided into those that form part of the normal higher education operation and those that are apart from the higher education environment.

University committees will help bring different lecturers and researchers from different departments into contact with one another. These contacts can then be used for research, teaching, or any other problem that might appear. In this way the person both increases skills and visibility. Therefore by gaining exposure to different parts of one's higher education institution, support the development of relationships which can result in unexpected future career opportunities.

Outside committees help academics to stay in contact with industry and the private sector. Again these contacts can be used for research, funding or placing of graduate students.

3.4.2 Social gatherings

 Participating in social activities may assist one on the job as well. Individuals may find social occasions as less threatening situations in which to ask

questions to others about how to solve difficult problems; how to receive technical expertise needed; and how to bypass barriers in the higher education institution. Social activities might include participating in social gatherings with colleagues after work, taking part in sport activities (e.g. golf with co-workers or clients), or attending higher education institution-sponsored events. Keeping in contact with one's work associates - including bosses, peers and clients - is also regarded as important. Thus, by asking about their priorities, you can in a way can assist in meeting their needs. Following through on promises of assistance help develop trusting relationships. Socialising with others and engaging in hallway conversations and other informal communication mechanisms help develop trusting relationships. This is especially important for professionals who engage in business travel or telecommute (Forret & Sullivan, 2002:254).

Within this academic networking process, collaborating with peers in one's profession may not only enhance job performance through the acquisition of new ideas, information and contacts, but can also provide a source of social support. Networking with others in a profession is a key to solving problems and staying abreast of changes in industry. Through one's involvement in one's professional association, one can visit other areas and trade ideas with peers.

Some higher education institutions help their former employees to stay in touch with one another through the development of alumni associations. For example, HEFCE (2002) initiated the AlumNet Website for their alumni, retired partners, and friends. A number of services are offered via AlumNet such as members who search the directory for friends and maintain a profile containing their contact information, employment history and education. In additionally, news items, networking events and opportunities to earn continuing professional education credits are listed on the Website. Furthermore, members are able to post open jobs for their company or clients and are able to keep a confidential resume on file regardless of whether or not they are looking for a job change. Approximately 40% of firms rely on such employee referral systems as a major source of new appointments. Besides finding jobs, professionals can use the AlumNet to gain needed information and support from colleagues around the world (Forret & Sullivan, 2002:254).

For young or novice academics collaborating with peers in the same subject discipline/profession can enhance job performance through the acquisition of new ideas, information and contacts, but can also provide a source of social support. While more experienced academics, via former employees or higher education institutions, stay in touch with one another through the development of alumni associations. One such an example is HEFCE (2002), who initiated the AlumNet Website for their alumni, retired partners and friends. Other services also provided by this website are the following:

- Search the directory for friends (e.g. maintaining a profile of contact information, employment history and education).

- Hunting for news items/work events and opportunities (e.g. in order to earn continuing professional education credits which are listed).
- Able to post open job opportunities of their company to acquaintances (e.g. 40% of firms rely on such employee referral systems as a major source of new appointments).
- To gain needed information and support from colleagues world-wide (Forret & Sullivan, 2002).

4. STARTING AND MAINTAINING A NETWORK

A person can already be part of several networks without realising it. A student, for example, knows teachers, coaches, counsellors and the relatives of other students. Where a person lives, he/she probably has neighbours. An assortment of other acquaintances can also contribute to the network such as the person who cuts your hair, your doctor and dentist, the small-business owner who lives down the street, etc. Add to that people you know from your own activities, such as religious groups, clubs, or volunteer organisations, and you have just put together your own pool of contacts (Rowh, 2002:18).

Taking advantage of these contacts is what networking is all about. When looking for a job or otherwise getting ahead, you can use this human capital as sources of help or information. In some cases, contacts are employers whom you can approach directly about possible jobs. In others, they may have the potential to refer you to contacts of their own. Either way, the contact is worth cultivating as well, as there is nothing wrong with that approach. The biggest misconception about networking is that it is somehow unfair to take advantage of personal and/or professional networking to further one's career.

First, identify the various people in your life who might serve as useful contacts. Get a stack of index cards (or use your computer). On separate cards, write a heading for each of the different groups of people you know or groups you belong to where you include headings such as "Teachers", "Neighbours", "Family", "Youth Groups", "Coaches", "Volunteer groups", etc. This can be followed by referring back to each card and writing down the names of people you know who fit under that heading. Highlight those who seem to offer the most potential as contacts, and add information such as addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Remember to identify gaps and consider ways of filling these gaps. When you begin looking for a job, use these lists as a starting point. Call, write or otherwise obtain contact with anyone who might be a possible employer or who might refer you to those considering new hires. Be sure to thank your contacts and keep them up to date regarding your job search.

In the process, avoid being pushy or demanding, but rather be both direct and polite. Rowh (2002:18) suggests making statements such as: "If you have any job openings, I'd appreciate being considered", or "If you know of any job opportunities, would you mind letting me know?". Make sure they know how to reach you and be sure to follow up with a thank-you note or call whenever a contact provides any type of help.

The most important qualities or traits needed to network include confidence, initiative and the ability to interact comfortably with others. Do not be bashful about developing new contacts to complement the ones you already have. For example, if you have ideas about career areas you would like to explore, get in touch with adults working in those areas and ask questions about the field in question. Most professionals are flattered to be contacted by young people seeking to enter their profession and thus are thrilled to interact with them and share insights about their career experience. Whether you are interacting with new contacts or an existing network, keep in mind that you cannot have too many friends and acquaintances. The more people you know, the better your chances of networking successfully (Rowh, 2002:19).

In contrast with Rowh's (2002) discussion of this principle in very simple terms, Forret and Sullivan (2002) offer a more structured approach, although the basic principle remains the same. For example by using the Balanced Scorecard Framework, they recommend that individuals examine their relationships with others in three domains, namely higher education institution; profession; and community. Utilising a balanced scorecard approach to networking helps ensure that managers and professionals reach different groups of individuals. This reduces the amount of potential overlap in their networking efforts. Focusing on profession entails networking primarily with counterparts in other higher education institutions. Concentrating on community means networking with members of the broader geographical area in which one lives. Building a diverse network through this approach enhances social capital by extending one's reach into different groups of individuals. Numerous types of behaviours for networking in one's higher education institution, profession and community are listed (Forret & Sullivan, 2002:256).

The five guidelines for implementing the balanced scorecard approach to networking are:

- *Determine your career goals*: This is the "strategy formulation" stage. Where do you want to be in your career? What objectives would you like to achieve? Spend time reflecting on the type of work you find meaningful and the amount of balance between work and non-work activities you would like to attain. Utilise information and insights gleaned from self-assessments and coaching received to formulate how you want your career to progress. Determine both short-term and long-term goals and evaluate their importance.

- *Assess your current social capital*: Visually depict your network and assess the size, structure and composition of its members. How large is your network? Are most of your contacts acquainted with one another? How diverse are the members? To achieve your career goals and objectives, determine who should be a member of your network. For example, if you are interested in starting a business, how many venture capitalists do you know? Create a vision of how your ideal network would look.

- *Network in your organisation, profession, and community*: After determining your career goals and who might be able to help you achieve them, align your networking efforts. Look for networking activities in your higher education institution, profession and community that would help you developmentally; that you would enjoy; and that would provide you with the opportunity to build relationships with key individuals. Enlist the support of your family and work associates. Build time into your schedule and allocate needed financial resources for your networking efforts.

- *Be prepared to give*: The goal of building networks is to contribute to others. No one wants to feel manipulated. Successful networking is based upon building trusting relationships, which tends to occur through involvement with others on projects, committees and service opportunities. Helping others will increase the likelihood that you may receive assistance in the future, by invoking the universal norm of reciprocity. The importance of relationships extends into technology as well. Thus it is important to note that networking is a two-way communication process.

- *Evaluate your social capital*: Redraw your network. How has your network changed? Has it grown? Are you connected to more diverse groups of individuals? Assess the quality of the relationships you have developed. Are you an active contributor to the members in your network? Do you need to spend more time and effort strengthening your relationships? Consider whether there are additional individuals with whom you should build relationships. What further networking efforts could be implemented to enhance your social capital? (Forret & Sullivan, 2002:256).

5.   NETWORKING AMONG STUDENTS AND OTHER GROUPS

The following networking groups are regarded as the most important for an academic.

5.1   Students

Networking should start among students while at university. Keep in mind that you need not be actively involved in job hunting to network. In fact, students can begin the networking process while still in school. The first thing students should do is establish strong relationships with their teachers. It is best to focus on those who are most connected in the world of work. Students might also consider the value of working as interns or part-timers. Internships and part-time jobs that are relevant to a future career are better investments than are jobs that might be fun but are not resumé-builders.

Not only can they network with their lecturers and counsellors, but networking can also take place among themselves. Any given class will consist of a mixture of students of different gender, age, social standing, majors, etc. Students can network with these different groups of people and not only improve their assignments during their years at university, but can also keep these contacts for use later in the work situation.

The simplest models of career choice and job search assume that people choose a career from a large set of options using full information. In reality, is seems likely that people use social networks of friends, peers, parents, as well as teachers to obtain career advice and information on jobs. These include various forms of networking and students perceive networking to be quite important in finding a job. Students who solicit help from current alumni members of their fraternity or sorority are most likely to obtain high paying jobs (Marmaros & Sacerdote, 2002:870). Students who join fraternities (or sororities) may be inherently more outgoing and socially able people (thereby increasing their chances of obtaining a job).

The study done by Marmaros and Sacerdote (2002) indicated that 35% of the full sample had job offers at the time of the survey, implying that 56% of those who intended to work after graduation, had had offers. Of the 368 students who planned to work the next year, 48% obtained help from career services, 17% from professors, 30% from a parent and 9% from a relative. Additionally, 19% of the people obtained help from an alumnus outside of their fraternity or sorority and 9% of people obtained help from an alumnus or a current member of their fraternity or sorority, while 5% of people reported being helped by a roommate (Marmaros & Sacerdote, 2002:873). It seems quite plausible that close personal friendships forged during the freshman year would affect future employment decisions.

The data shows that different networking strategies are used for different types of job search. 34% of students entering education or teaching rely on help from a professor versus 8% for students entering finance. Students entering finance rely heavily on fraternity help or help from relatives. In deciding upon careers, law and medical students make little use of professor or fraternity help, but are likely to rely on relatives (Marmaros & Sacerdote, 2002:874).

5.2   Mentoring

The mentor programme provides students with many benefits, including career counselling, practical work experience, employment opportunities and networking. 50% of the students and 57% of the mentors in a study done by Baker (1998) indicated that the mentor either assisted or advised the student in his/her job search. Although this activity has not been emphasised, it is a significant benefit to the programme. Mentors have been extremely helpful in providing industry and company specific information, such as which companies might be hiring, personal instructions to employment decision-making, and an industry perspective on key tasks such as resumé preparations and interviewing (Baker, 1998:265).

It is also notable that the students' relationship with their mentors often marks the development of their professional networks. Most students have probably started developing their professional network even before they have become familiar with the terminology. It begins with their first contact with their mentor and is built through internships, professional meetings, and other industry contacts. The mentor programme is an ideal place for students to start their professional network, because it occurs in a setting which is not intimidating.

This is important, because many students find it difficult to make cold calls. Once they have the beginnings of a network, it is easier to expand it, since their mentor can provide personal introductions to managers in other higher education institutions.

Several students and mentors maintain their professional relationship with their counterpart in the Mentor Programme. Industry contacts developed either directly or indirectly as a result of students' participation in the programme, helped them acquire trade leads, identify key sources of industry information and find new job and career opportunities (Baker, 1998:265).

As networking has become more important as a career planning tool, students who have already started to develop their personal network have a head start on those who are trying to develop their network without a willing industry partner (Baker, 1998:266).

5.3   New graduates

It is quite natural for new graduates joining an higher education institution to form a group at similar times. They will often be arriving in a new city and will be in the same situation as one another. A group feeling can help to ease people into the higher education institution by helping them to adapt to the new environment. In situations where a few recruits are spread across a number of different sites, it can also help provide them with other points of contact.

In the short term, networking with peers can have advantages socially. In the longer term it can benefit the higher education institution as former members of a graduate intake reach more senior positions. They will know the backgrounds and scope of knowledge of people in different parts of the higher education institution who can act together to get things done. At any stage people who are part of the group can benefit from sharing knowledge of different parts of the higher education institution and its processes (Graham & McKenzie, 1995:38).

The creation of a group will happen fairly naturally in the early stages of the graduates' career. It is also one of several networks of which the recruit will become a part within the higher education institution (between different departments or sites). The different groups can all be beneficial in creating a sense of belonging (Graham & McKenzie, 1995:39).

5.4   Networking among women

Gould (2002) tackles the problem of women working in a predominantly male-orientated field and advocates the idea of mentoring, not only between women, but throughout the board.

For many women researchers, this will be an invaluable chance to discuss with others who are facing the same obstacles, especially for those who work predominantly for or exclusively with men. This much is clear from the popularity of formal women-orientated networking opportunities now firmly

established in conjunction with some of the major scientific societies in the USA. A problem shared may not be a problem solved, but you could go home feeling a whole lot better (Gould, 2002:39).

Networking opportunities must, however, be created. Unless someone takes the time to organise that kind of gathering, it is poss ble for a woman to attend some conferences and never speak to another woman. For women the opportunity to network is extremely valuable. You get to meet people in many different areas, but, more importantly, you can share experiences and learn from one another about what work or what did not work in a given situation. As an example of this the (American) Women Chemists Committee organise a biannual "networking breakfast and lunch" (Gould, 2002:39).

Together with organising networking opportunities, the whole idea of mentoring is also being pushed. Mentoring is a way of gaining insight and experience with the assistance of somebody who is knowledgeable. Whether you have a male or a female mentor, it means that the person has been through the system much longer and knows the ins and outs of the unwritten rules. By taking part of the mentoring programme, a student or junior person is put into contact with a more experienced person who is able to answer questions and help where necessary (Gould, 2002:40).   The development of a mentor programme to help in career management is also supported by Baker (1998).

6.   CONCLUSION

In conceptualising networking as a professional development strategy, it became evident that academics need a paradigm shift with regard to their roles as well as need to take charge of their careers to survive strategic competitiveness.

Another factor, the dramatic decrease in job security and training in South Africa, resulted in individuals moving more quickly and more often between higher education institutions, occupations and industries. In order to flourish in the no boundary career environment, individuals will need to build both their human capital and their social capital.   Adopting a balanced scorecard approach to networking can help individuals become more proficient at handling career transitions. Co-ordinating networking efforts to reach different groups of individuals - those associated with their higher education institution, profession, and community - can provide valuable information, resources, and learning experiences to help individuals thrive in their new careers.

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