

How Does Your Net Work?

If the value of a strong professional network was ever in question, its benefits are easily identified in this day and age when cutbacks and layoffs are so common. What's the first thing people do if they find themselves without work? Put their network to work for them. Get the word out on the street.

A network of colleagues and friends that know you and what you do can actually be a safety "net" when the going gets tough. It doesn't matter if the scenario is as dramatic as looking for a job or just pooling resources to answer a question that has come across your desk. Still, despite its importance most of us aren't actively building our network or thinking through the best way to do so.

Too often "networking" events involve the passing of business cards and no real communication. Real networking involves getting to know people. Listening to what they do and telling them what you do. The truest and most valuable networking goes beyond basic communication to true conversation where there is opportunity to develop genuine connections and interest. This is where in-depth understanding of one another can occur and common ground can be found. It's on this level that the net is the strongest and most valuable. This is not the kind of thing that happens at a luncheon table or on Facebook. It's a process. It takes place in many shapes and forms over a period of time.

So, how do you build a network that can really work for you? First, remember that a network is never complete. Networks evolve and have many different levels of bonds. It's simply good business practice (and personal, for that matter) to mindfully and continually build your network. As you set out to do so, don't forget that the lines in a network are two-way streets. Real communication is not one-sided. Balance the seesaw on the playground. Be an active part of others' networks if you want them to be part of yours. Moreover, know how to communicate who you are and what you do. It can feel awkward to "toot your own horn" but you have to toot first if your network is going to take over the job down the line. The better job you do of sharing yourself, your skills and special traits, the better your network can work for you.

I'll argue some of business' biggest issues boil down to ineffective communication. Networking is a great case in point. Effective networking is essentially effective communication. When you do it right, it works! Effective operations management requires effective communication. Human resources issues? Effective communication, once again. So if you're asking yourself how well your net works, start by exploring how effective your communication style is and how much impact the messages you share have. A network is only as powerful as the communications skills behind it. Are you on target with your messages?