

support networks for professional development

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Networking, the process of developing and using contacts for information, advice, and moral support as one pursues a career, has been increasingly recognized as a vital, potent force for those who wish to move ahead in today's business and professional world. Extension professionals, who derive their support from complex cooperative interrelationships, have opportunities to cultivate multiple networks.

The concept of networking isn't new. We've long heard the phrase, "It's not what you know, but who you know;" and the "good-old-boy" network has always been an informal, but strong, influence on decision making. However, what's new is the open recognition and acceptance of the importance of the networking process and the purposeful implementation of both formal and informal networking relationships.

Why Is Networking Important?

The effect of people's social relations on their professional, business, and economic attainment has been documented. Granovetter found that men who received the best job offers were those who tended to have broader networks of acquaintances.¹ These contacts provided them with unexpected opportunities for advancement. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that almost half (48%) of all jobs come through personal contacts.² Others have found that an individual's psychological well-being is associated with the support provided by networks.³ Networking can stimulate the flow of information and speed innovation.⁴ The

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effects of networking have been shown in studies ranging from work productivity to migration flow.⁵ Even the most formal institutions are viewed, by those who know them well, as a framework around personal ties.⁶

**How Is
Networking
Used?**
*Within
Organizations*

Some employers have seized the networking concept, which has always existed on an informal basis, and created their own internal networks to link people and needs. For example, a Minnesota-based firm, Wilson Learning Corporation, was experiencing such rapid growth that the close personal contact that once existed among personnel had begun to erode.⁷ Nobody knew who was especially good in a given product or good at a specific marketing strategy. To solve this problem, a company-wide network was developed. All sales representatives completed a short questionnaire about their competencies in three areas: selling skills, knowledge of products, and familiarity with different industries. The information was then stored on a computer so that a new salesperson could immediately contact one who had expertise in a particular area.

In Counties

An Extension agent who uses both personal and group affiliations to promote successful programs is one of the most astute networkers we know. This agent maintains high visibility in the county by working cooperatively with local leaders, politicians, and education officials. The local media give Extension programs wide coverage. These supporters are given visibility and public appreciation for their contributions at an annual banquet.

While they're being rewarded and acclaimed, they're also observing the awards received by individuals and groups associated with the Extension program. They become familiar with the impact the program makes in their county. Here's an excellent example of exchange that works for the benefit of all. This same agent, while participating in other organizations, is always alert to new people and prospective leadership that can be recruited to take part in Extension outreach.

*Across
Group
Boundaries*

Using networking that naturally occurs across group boundaries can help Extension personnel. Every person belongs to a variety of groups and assumes different roles within each of them. The shared attributes of people in different groups are a basis for developing social relations across group boundaries or networking.

This overlapping membership among different groups is advantageous.⁸ Such overlapping encourages exchanges of

leadership among groups and communication through different media (newsletters, fliers, phone calls) and by word of mouth. People are more willing to become involved because someone they know and trust is already involved.

Types of Networks

Many types of networks exist. Family and friends, social and religious groups, professional colleagues, business acquaintances, academic personnel, local and state government officials, Extension clientele . . . all of these represent people who are in different roles and can make important contributions to both private and professional goals of Extension personnel.

Different networks can be used simultaneously. For example, if you're responsible for organizing a field day in your county, you may need to draw from friends and family, business acquaintances, other Extension professionals, local government officials, plus your clientele. If you're starting a new 4-H group in your area, local teachers, school administrators, and young people with whom you're associated will be your support group. Maybe your greatest need at times is a fellow agent in another county who will lend an ear while you share your problems.

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Why Become Involved in Networking?

A well-functioning networking system can advance your career, improve your lifestyle, gratify your own self-interests, and, at the same time, help others move right ahead with you. One's own self-concept, reflecting how one sees oneself in the various support systems or networks, is important. One of the greatest satisfactions is the emotional reinforcement networking can give.

Extension professionals enjoy a great deal of visibility with both clientele and those who are in a broad range of decision-making roles. These groups are interested in you as an individual and not only want you to succeed, but want you to advance when opportunity appears. A successful you enhances their interests, also.

What Is Networking?

A network isn't necessarily something you join, although formal organizations for networking do exist. Constructive networking must be based on assertiveness, positive atti-

tudes, and commonalities. You don't have to simply like someone to be supportive of that person for specific purposes. Networking isn't frivolous, it's:

- Making contacts with the expressed purpose of helping one another.
- A team approach that involves sharing specific goals rather than shared ideology and consensus.
- Sharing work experiences.
- Being aware of what's going on in other businesses and other professions as well as your own.
- Exchange of career information.
- A mutual support system for problem solving.
- A source for cross-pollination of creative ideas.
- A means of developing and swapping skills that increase a sense of professionalism.
- An opportunity to exhibit and practice leadership.
- A link-up that can produce "collective clout."
- A means of getting advance notice of things to come in your community and your profession . . . news before it's news . . . information is power.
- Gaining access to other networks.⁹

Approaches to Networking

Networking isn't compromising your self or your job in any way and isn't a substitute for competence. This mutual support system shouldn't operate only when a favor is wanted, but rather cultivated on a regular basis. Social exchange is as important as material exchange. The challenge isn't simply to develop contacts, but to develop useful contacts and use them.

Some approaches to networking are:

- Mix with others outside Extension and outside your own age and gender groups. Make an effort to meet new people at social events and get to know more acquaintances better.
- Get maximum mileage out of your business cards. In addition to the usual exchange, use a card as a quick way to write a short note of praise or appreciation. It helps the person contacted to remember you along with your title and address and provides encouragement and support for them.
- Take risks. Get out in a new adventure, a new sport, a new hobby. Expand your horizons. You'll be a more interesting person and gain new insights as well as meet new people.

- Join various organizations, inside and outside Extension, to benefit you personally and professionally. Volunteer for extra responsibilities that will demonstrate your skills to a different audience.
- Keep up to date on current events. Don't depend on television as a total resource. Knowledge in fields other than your own can be a real bonus when interacting with others.
- Always leave a "good taste" in whatever job or position you leave. References are difficult to get when you've departed in a fit of anger. Loyalty to one's job and colleagues is a professional trait.
- Get to know the experts in your field and become known to your administrators.
- Start a file of names and organizations that might be helpful to you for future reference.
- Make a special effort to have good rapport with your local communication media and show your appreciation for the visibility they provide.
- Cultivate contacts farther away from home base. A colleague from another state can often provide a "fresh" idea or approach to a problem.
- Courtesies are remembered. Acknowledge *someone who has made a special achievement as well as those who have done favors for you.*
- Use good taste to let your own achievements be known. If you have done something you think is significant, don't hesitate to let people know who wouldn't otherwise be informed.

The influences of interpersonal relationships, whether negative or positive, are pervasive throughout life. Most of us are networking in a subconscious and haphazard way, but through lack of planning, many opportunities are missed.

Planning Effective Networking System

Successful networking is based on assessing your needs and assets in a systematic, organized manner and participating in a kind of old-fashioned "barter." Your professional network should include contacts tailored to your job responsibilities and the goals you hope to accomplish.

Therefore, your first step in planning an effective networking system is to clarify your career goals.¹⁰ Who are the people in your present support group who can help you achieve these goals? How well and in what ways are they meeting present needs? Sometimes, different methods are necessary to keep a network alive than to begin one. If additional contacts are needed, ways of approaching them must be considered.

It's extremely important that you determine the kinds of support you can offer in exchange, as a networker, to both your existing and potential contacts. Each networking plan will be unique to that individual's personal and professional goals, but the plans of all networkers who are communicating with each other will be enhanced through this interaction.

Summary

Networking, helping others while they help you, is recognized as an important force for achievement in today's world. One's social contacts increase job opportunities, improve psychological well-being, stimulate the flow of information and innovation as well as influence where and how one works and lives.

Networking across groups can result in leadership exchange among groups, faster communication, and joint activities that can expand the outreach and community impact of those participating. Companies and organizations can use the networking concept as well as individuals.

Most networking is done on an informal basis and different types of networks can be used simultaneously. Exchange is important. You don't always get back from the same person to whom you gave, but you'll get back from the system itself.

Successful networking can provide a strong boost to your personal and professional goals and your total program achievement, while, at the same time, rewarding those with whom you interact. "Beginners" and those who are more established benefit equally from such interrelationships as do people in both county level and state positions.

Extension professionals enjoy a great deal of visibility to both clientele and those who are in a broad range of decision-making roles. In preparing for careers, Extension professionals have developed communication skills and organizational ability along with their subject-matter knowledge. These are valuable attributes to share with others who can, in turn, share with you and give support to your personal and professional goals.

Footnotes

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