

Networking in seven simple steps



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IESE's Fabrizio Ferraro and Conor Neill provide insights into the rapidly evolving science of social networking.

Networking is like brushing your teeth. Does it feel natural or enjoyable? Not really. Is it enough to just brush when a toothache occurs? Regrettably no.

In the same way, networking requires constant and careful attention over a prolonged period of time.

In their technical note, "[Creating and Nurturing Your Social Network: The Art of Building Long-term Mutually Beneficial Relationships](#)," IESE's [Fabrizio Ferraro](#) and [Conor Neill](#) draw a distinction between what networking is and what it is not.

They suggest that the familiar scramble for assistance when something urgent is needed — a job, some advice or a charitable donation — is not actually networking, but rather, part of the "sales" process.

In fact, most of your useful networking relationships will be developed long before you actually need them. What's more, the longer you work on your investment, the greater the return can be.

Start small

Networking does not come naturally to most people. A bountiful garden is not created overnight. The plants are selected with careful deliberation and nurtured over time.

Unwanted weeds are slowly identified and removed.

If you want to grow a garden, the question may well be, "How do I begin?" The answer is easy. "Start today and take small steps."

- *Communicate.* Ask lots of questions and show an interest in the passions of the people you meet. If you need a favor early on, then don't ask too much. Simple requests for advice or contact suggestions make it easy for others to help you. You need to make a deposit in the relationship bank before asking for a large withdrawal.
- *Appreciate.* Always let people know you appreciate their help. A written thank-you note or a thoughtful act stands out in a world where e-mail reigns supreme.
- *Inventory.* It doesn't hurt to make a list every now and then. Who do you know? Even more important, who do you want to know?

Seven steps to success

Here are some practical considerations to help you master the art of building long-term mutually beneficial relationships.

- *Interdependence.* Our teamwork ability and relationship management skills are every bit as important as the projects we undertake. It pays to acknowledge the value of the networking process and make space for it.
- *Longevity.* Good things take time and you have to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince. The key is to start building your network long before you need it.
- *Reciprocity.* Networking is not all about what others can do for you. Think about what you can bring to the table. Sometimes it begins with a simple compliment about a presentation or project. If you offer someone help, then be sure to follow through. Trust and reputation depend on reliability.
- *Similarity.* While it's easier to befriend people who are like you, it's always possible to find some middle ground with others, no matter how different they might appear at first. Step outside your comfort zone and learn from people with diverse backgrounds, objectives and incentives. Bill Gates once said in an interview that he prefers to read an entire magazine, not only the parts that interest him. That way, you always learn something new.
- *Proximity.* Most social relationships are born out of proximity. However, being close won't help you if you don't try to get actively involved.
- *Cross-fertilization.* Successful leaders influence contacts from one network to

another. Think about the people in your contact list. Who needs attention? Who is owed favors or needs your help? You can begin thinking of your network as a lifetime journey, rather than a one-off effort.

- *Sociability*. If you do not enjoy meeting new people, it is unlikely that they will enjoy spending time with you. Therefore, it is key to find venues and situations where you actually enjoy networking, rather than forcing yourself to schmooze in uncomfortable settings. Meeting new people can be fun as long as you find out what works best for you and don't approach it as a chore.

Beyond professional success

Make time to lead a well-rounded life outside of work. It can be a powerful and rewarding experience to share time with people who value you, not for what you do or what you bring them. These relationships are a valuable source of energy and self-confidence.

In all aspects of life, networking doesn't come down to the basic question, "How will this benefit me?" Rather, it makes more sense to ask, "How can I add to this situation?"

You will be rewarded in time as your garden grows.

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