The power of networking
By Chris Johnson

"Networks are like politics, everyone has an opinion but hardly anyone does anything about it".

Despite all the facts, surveys, and stories very few of us regularly maintain our networks. In a global connected economy networking is an essential part of a senior executives "tool box". However, for many it's still an on/off activity, that doesn't work properly when they need it most. The reasons for **not** networking are well documented and usually comprise of comments such as:

- "I haven't got time"
- "I network within the organisation"
- "I don't like that sort of thing"
- "Nothing ever comes out of them, it's a waste of time"

From working with hundreds of senior executives in Europe/US/New Zealand, I would make just two observations:

1. Networking does work if approached correctly, and
2. It's a long-term investment.

There are many types of networks and they can be use in many ways, for example:

- Business - customers, suppliers, partners
- Professional - trade, professional bodies
- Social – family, friends
- Technology based - LinkedIn, facebook, KEA
- Community based, real and virtual

I would like to focus primarily on networking in the context of your career. There are four main routes to the job market:
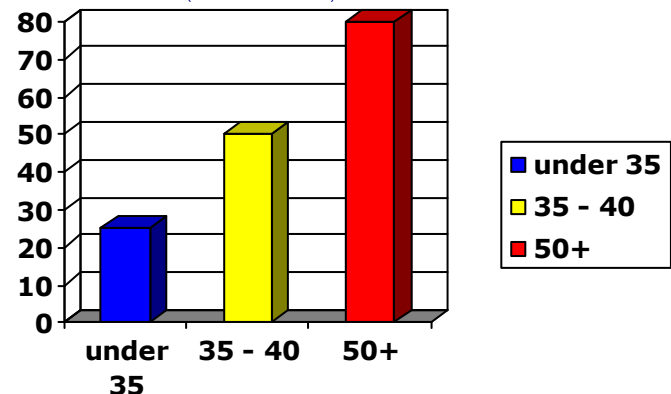
- Advertisements
- Search and recruitment providers
- Speculative approaches
- Networking

Fig 1: Value of networking by age / job opportunity
(Source: FT 2007)

Legend: under 35, 35 – 40, 50+

By far and away the **most valuable** route is your 'network'. The importance of your network increases as you progress through your career. In the early stages of your career identifying job opportunities is often about responding to adverts, talking to friends, checking 'online' etc. However, the most valuable route to market as you progress is the network, at age 50 years plus the network is responsible for 80% of opportunities (Fig 1).

The other interesting thing to note is that the most valuable people in your network are those you see on an infrequent basis.(Fig 2),typically once or twice a year. It's often the secondary contacts i.e. a contact of a contact that are the most valuable.

"Developing your network takes time."

In my experience, it takes a good six months to get going and then it needs regular maintenance.

In terms of creating a network, try not to limit your thinking; start with a quick brainstorm of all those you might think are potentially helpful, try not to dismiss anyone at this stage, then use checklists and categories to help you start getting potential names grouped together. (E.g. ex colleagues, ex Boss). Initially aim for 80 - 100 individuals who could possibly be in your network then classify and prioritise them. Consider how you intend to approach individuals, i.e. face to face, phone, text, email, online.

Before you activate the network, think carefully about what you can **give back** to your network as well as what you can take from it. This last point is often forgotten!
Just one word of advice: *"what you get out of something is proportional to what you put in."* The smart networkers in my opinion spend as much time thinking about what they can do for others, as they do about thinking for themselves.

Fig 2: Value in terms of frequency
(Source: FT 2007)

- ■ 2 x a week
- □ < 1 x a year
- ■ 1 x a year
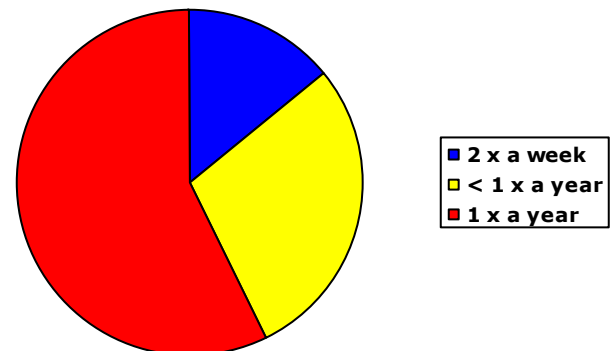
Ten hints and tips

1. Start before you need it
2. Make it part of your day job
3. Nothing meaningful comes without working at it
4. Don't over do the emails and internet
5. Stay in touch, find a reason to contact people
6. It takes more effort than you think
7. Give something back
8. Be careful not to make assumptions
9. Remember it's the secondary connections that are often the most valuable
10. Be careful not to burn any bridges

network example

ex colleagues
past bosses
professional contacts
family
external contacts
Alumni groups