

## Networking – Uncover the Nectar

What does the word networking mean to you? Perhaps it suggests ‘sales people’ standing around at a ‘cocktail party’ type of event full of people in business suits making small talk and pretending to be interested in each other. In this article Jacqueline Harris shows how networking can be fun and is a valuable life skill for all of us to achieve.

What if networking were about spending time with great people getting to know them both professionally and personally? Or knowing that whatever you want to achieve in your life someone in your network will help you? Most people have between 200 and 500 contacts and anyone you want to meet is only four to five people away; so all the people you could ever want to meet could be available within your current circle of business and personal contacts.



Do you feel that you should be like a lion hunting for its supper or a beautiful butterfly flitting around the room? Well the most effective networker is in fact the bee. The bee hovers around our gardens looking for pollen, gathering nectar from flowers and taking it back to the hive to turn into honey. In the process of buzzing from one plant to another the bee pollinates the plants and so gives as well as takes.

### What is networking?

There are several definitions for networking and even more interpretations of these definitions. Here are two:

*“Using someone you know to introduce you to someone they know.”*

*“Networking is the process of developing and nurturing a network of contacts in order to maximise opportunities for oneself and others.” (Gwen Rhys)*

We network for many reasons. In business development terms the objective is to be introduced to a target who could become a client. What if that target were your next employer or employee? What if they were the person in your company who could help you succeed with your next project? There are many benefits of networking including:

- Obtaining information
- Gathering knowledge about markets, clients, competitors and targets
- Meeting new suppliers
- Developing ideas
- Personal development and learning

Successful networkers are proactive, have clear objectives, know who they want to network with and plan their time carefully. They approach networking with a long-term view rather than looking for short-term gain and adopt the belief that you have to give before you can receive.

What can you give to your networking contacts? Try connecting people in your network together or sharing information and ideas.

## The importance of clear objectives

Networking is an immensely productive way of finding new clients and new business if done effectively. There are thousands of opportunities being created for us both formally and informally and yet many business people waste their valuable time because they don't plan their networking. They set out on a journey without deciding on their destination and – surprise, surprise – end up in the wilderness.



Successful networkers set clear objectives so decide:

- What do you want to achieve?
- What and who would make a good contact for you?
- What type of person would help you to achieve your objectives?
- Who do you know?
- What could you offer in return?

## Turning objectives into action

Once you know...

- exactly what you want to achieve,
- the type of person who would help you to achieve your objectives,
- and who specifically would make a good contact

... you can work with this knowledge.

The first step is to look at your existing network in a fresh light and look for all the people who match your 'ideal contact' criteria. You can then focus on creating discussions with them that will lead you to your goal.

The second step is to bring new people into your network who also match your 'ideal contact' criteria. "How do I do this?" I hear you ask.

You might firstly consider attending events run by professional bodies, networking groups and industry specific conferences. Evaluate each one that you attend to ensure that they are attracting your potential networking contacts or clients. The quality of the opportunity at these events depends on the dynamics of your local business community.

A more specific method of expanding your network is to put yourself in the shoes of your 'ideal contact' and think about what networking events you might attend and what you might do outside of work, e.g. play golf, go to the gym, be a school governor, etc. Networking can take up some of your precious time so why not look at your current activities? Are you making the most of them?

How about combining networking with something that you are interested in or can learn from?

What about:

- Involvement in a voluntary organisation
- Sports clubs
- Charity work
- Hobbies – current and new

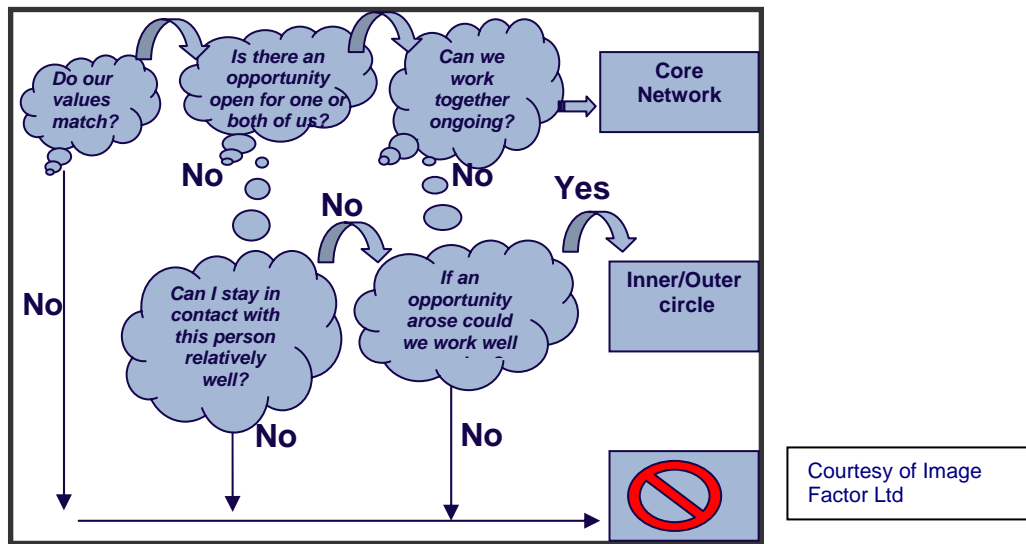
You will get great results if you combine clear objectives with relationships and activities that you enjoy.

What about networking within your organisation? Look out for social events or other meetings and conferences that give you the opportunity to mix with your colleagues. How about using the informal opportunities that are presented to you on a daily basis such as talking at the coffee machine or whilst in the lift or creating the opportunities by suggesting lunch or coffee with a colleague you don't regularly have contact with?

### Developing your network – improving the quality

Once you have mapped out your network and identified contacts from all parts of your life you can then plan actions you can take to develop your network.

- Do you have enough contacts of the right quality and in the right areas in your network?
- Will these contacts help you to achieve your objectives?



Perhaps you have enough contacts in your network and realise that they are not currently providing you with the opportunities that you are looking for. For how many of your contacts can you confidently answer the questions in the above diagram?

Often the quality needs to be improved by increasing the depth of relationship and:

- Maintaining frequent contact
- Finding out more about them
- Showing an interest
- Asking for help
- Finding ways to help them
- Connecting contacts together

### Networking – uncover the nectar in your life

As the saying goes – “it’s not what you know but who you know” and so networking is a skill for life and a tool for achieving whatever you want to in your life. Enrich your life by building relationships and meeting people. Become a bee and buzz around gathering nectar, being curious, seeing links between people, ideas and concepts and remember..... **give, give, give and gain.**