

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

VIRTUAL NETWORKS ARE BOOMING, BUT DOES MEETING IN PERSON STILL GIVE A PROFESSIONAL EDGE? WHAT ARE THE COMMERCIAL BENEFITS TO CONNECTING ONLINE? AND SHOULD COMPANIES HELP STAFF LEARN HOW TO NETWORK?



NETWORKING USED TO be so simple. All you had to do was navigate a crowded room, business card in hand, and introduce yourself. An event was an opportunity for career advancement and developing new connections.

The internet has changed everything. The technology boom has opened up many networks online and created real, focused, commercial opportunities. One merit of making connections online is the opportunity to tap into a vast international knowledge base. But the internet is not just a new, expansive way to communicate with other individuals. Businesses are exploiting these new networks, such as web-based crowdsourcing sites that allow new ideas to be shared with user communities, many of them specialists in a given field. Products can be developed far more quickly through these networks and are given a head-start in terms of marketing. This approach has been used by **Unilever**, **Starbucks** and **Heineken**, among others.

These networks can also be a source of valuable funding. Recently, California-based company **LIFX Labs** posted information about its revolutionary LED light smartbulb that can be controlled through a smartphone on crowdfunding site **Kickstarter** with the hope of raising \$100,000 of development funding. Two weeks later, the company had \$1.3 million through the site and the product is now on schedule for production in March 2013.

Mark Batey, Senior Lecturer in Organisational Psychology at **Manchester Business School**, believes that internet networks can reach incredibly far while still being quite specific in their focus. He comments: "There's a greater tendency now towards more targeted networks, especially ones where things are initiated through social media platforms. For organisations that facilitate these gatherings, the benefits are in the enhanced experience for the participants and the opportunity to problem solve."

The large modern company often has management teams spread across the globe and, increasingly, people use the internet to link with other professionals. But in a knowledge-based economy, individuals are

“YOU CAN HAVE WEBINARS AND PHONE MENTORING, BUT THE RELATIONSHIP IS SO IMPORTANT”

— MARIJO BOS, EUROPEAN PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S NETWORK



CASE STUDY:

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

DAVID GARTSIDE, ACCENTURE, LONDON, UK

Accenture, the professional services firm, boasts 24,000 employees across 54 countries, so technology is vital to day-to-day communication in the organisation. However, David Gartside, the Managing Director responsible for Accenture's HR and talent management practice, says the geographic spread also makes facilitating face-to-face meetings essential.

He says: "You should not underestimate the need to get people together physically to create the required trust and common understanding, especially if it is a new group or team."

Accenture has established in-house networks for each group of senior executives. Gartside is part

of the chief HR officers' network where they will discuss "HR analytics, millennials, ageing, the future workforce, that sort of thing," he explains.

As management and organisational structures become flatter, an individual's networks – both virtual and physical – must work in harmony. Gartside predicts that they are likely to become ever more important to career and organisational development. "You're going to have a much more distributed and networked workforce rather than just a lot of people working for you," he says. "The view that the only people who work for me are those on my payroll is breaking down."



TEAM WORK:
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▶ foolish to neglect their physical connections. Some critics argue that modern technology is causing people to lose their interpersonal skills and that companies should help their staff to learn to network more effectively, both in person and online.

In June 2012, **Cass Business School** in London appointed Julia Hobsbawm, founder of networking business Editorial Intelligence, as Visiting Professor in Networking – the first post of its type. At the time of the appointment, Professor Cliff Oswick, Head of Cass’s Faculty of Management, explained: “There is a growing

awareness of the importance of soft skills, such as networking, to business.”

Hobsbawm argues that since most business communication has migrated online, a static workforce has been created, one that is losing confidence, dynamism and the tangential benefits of real human contact. While she acknowledges the amazing opportunities created by new technology, Hobsbawm believes that staff who are isolated by email can become a threat to employers’ competitiveness. She thinks that offering formal training in networking skills would benefit both companies and the individuals concerned.

Hobsbawm says: “If people don’t have navigation through technology, their talents become degraded. The heart of this problem is productivity – there is a connection between wellbeing and productivity. Email is no substitute for human contact and companies should develop their staff’s softer skills and ensure that the office party is not the only time that they get together.”

By definition, telecoms giant **BT** is a technology pioneer. But with 100,000 employees in 170 countries, the company has to work hard to establish and retain formal face-to-face networks, even if a lot of day-to-day contact inevitably takes place online.

Caroline Waters, BT’s Director of People and Policy, explains: “Although our carbon policy says we shouldn’t incur unnecessary travel, when a leader is establishing a new team, he or she does travel out to meet them. This forms a relationship that can be maintained with less frequent visits and regular contact.”

Similarly, Mark Dixon, chief executive of global serviced office provider **Regus**, believes that

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— PROFESSOR CLIFF OSWICK,
CASS’S FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT

online introductions are a useful starting point, but professional relationships are often cemented in person. He says: “You can start a relationship online very successfully, but if you want your business to succeed, sooner or later you’ll need to meet the people you would like to turn into clients or staff. Regus has had a presence at the international property fair MIPIM since it started and I try to be there in person every year – even though it requires some effort to fit it around a busy schedule. I do it because I know it succeeds. It enables me to look the landlords and property owners we work with in the eye.”

Curated external networks remain popular with busy executives who want to meet the right tier of people away from the pressures of the office. The UK’s **Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD)** runs an HR Leaders’ Network, bringing together about 1,000 high-level HR professionals at about 40 face-to-face networking events a year.

“At more senior levels, people do still value meeting in person when developing relationships,” comments Stephanie Bird, the CIPD’s Director of HR Capability. “In a peer-to-peer group, people can contribute and learn and will know when an interesting topic is coming up.”

Marijo Bos, President of the **European Professional Women’s Network**, which has 3a,500 executive members, agrees. “A lot is done online and people use virtual networks to keep connected, but we have more than 500 face-to-face meetings in 20 cities every year and there is a greater richness of contact,” she says. “Yes, you can have webinars and phone mentoring, but a reflective conversation is so important.” ■

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Contact: haysjournal@hays.com

INSIGHT

21ST CENTURY NETWORKING

EXPLORING APPROACHES TO MAKING CONTACT



WHETHER NETWORKS EXIST on the internet or in reality, it is not sensible to throw people together and expect them to network effectively. Julia Hobsbawm, the new Visiting Professor in Networking at Cass Business School, has identified five key areas where she thinks a new approach to networking matters:

- People should be cultivating their ‘weak ties’ – those individuals encountered casually or unexpectedly who could develop into new and useful relationships. Potential networks are everywhere and not always in work-related places.
- Technical knowledge of a job role or organisation is a given in anyone with any professional ambition. But ‘loose knowledge’ – what and who we know outside of work – is also relevant and could also be useful to career development. Such information should be exploited appropriately.
- The ‘global green room’ – the elite networks that welcome senior people, but remain closed to those further down the professional chain – stifles creativity. Opening up established groups to outsiders and sharing knowledge and best practice on a more meritocratic basis could revitalise networks.
- ‘Marzipan managers’ should be a source of concern for organisations. These employees sit beneath the leadership icing and often feel frustrated and swamped in a sea of email and paperwork. Over time, they lose their confidence and companies crush their talent and potential. Responsible employers will encourage them to network for their own benefit and that of the organisation.
- Organisations should aspire to becoming ‘curious corporations’. In order to flourish and succeed, businesses must not be too insular and should be aware of what is happening outside their operation. To achieve this, they must engage with the broader world through external networks and information-sharing to generate new ideas.



CASE STUDY:

PEER SUPPORT

THIERRY LUTHI, CEGID, LYON, FRANCE

As Chief Financial Officer of French software firm Cegid, Thierry Luthi is fully conversant with new technology. But Luthi is also President of the Association Nationale des Directeurs Financiers et du Contrôle de Gestion (DFCG), an influential physical network of French finance directors, with 3,200 members in 15 French territories.

Every year the network holds about 400 meetings, plus a popular summit, designed to encourage the sharing of best practice.

“The network is hugely important because as it allows us to share our vision about our jobs, plus we can discuss specific issues, such as the evolution of the law in France,” Luthi explains.

“Being part of the network means I’m never working alone, never relying only on my own skills and outlook,” he adds.

“The value of any network, online or in person, is sharing views and speaking to colleagues about their experiences.”