

The perils of frantic and indiscriminate networking

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So, what colour is your parachute? Better still, do you know any parachute makers who might be able to send you a new one? The market in rapidly updated resumes has soared. It is the only market showing any signs of health at the moment.

You know what you have to do at a time like this. Get out there and network. Network as though your very life depended on it. Get some extra business cards printed, fill up the diary, take a deep breath and dive into that roomful of strangers.

And relax. Working the room is so 1980s. You might as well just stand there, pull out a 5kg "mobile phone" and extend its telescopic aerial as far as it will go. There are ways to build a more valuable network of personal contacts, but scattering cards at random is not one of them.

Where do people go wrong with networking? Some seem to think that it is all about them, a question of projecting a winning version of themselves on to a potentially hostile, or at least highly sceptical, audience. But this is a simplistic and ineffective approach.

"People oscillate between either socialising or selling," says James Caplin, a management coach. Socialising doesn't cut it, because that simply involves hanging around with people you either already know or who are so similar to you that you have little to gain from spending time with them. But frantic, unfocused selling to strangers is not much use either. It is daunting and tiring. And after another fruitless session of business "speed-dating", frustrated networkers may feel like abandoning any attempt to widen their networks at all.

Mr Caplin is working on a book provisionally titled *I Hate Networking*. It will be a follow-up to his useful *I Hate Presentations*, which I wrote about earlier this year. While researching his last book, Mr Caplin invited some contacts to come to a workshop on the subject of presentations. Three people felt moved to attend. Recently he asked again if anyone was interested in coming along to discuss networking with him. Twenty-two people showed up. A lot of us do seem to worry about this stuff.

"Good networkers form mutually beneficial relationships with other people," Mr Caplin says. "It's all about being reciprocal - being of value to someone else who is in turn valuable to you. Effective networking is really 'a way of being' - knowing what you have to offer and being prepared to offer it - rather than a sudden burst of counter-productive activity during a break at a conference." Personal networks have to be maintained and strengthened, especially in today's gloomy commercial environment. LinkedIn, the online networking service, is reporting a boom in activity. But navigating successfully through fast-changing networks can be tricky. And then there is that other thing about networks that some business leaders get wrong as well: they fail to make the most of the informal social networks that already exist inside the organisation.

Social network analysis, supported by new technology, can generate startling diagrams that reveal how information and ideas flow - or fail to flow - through the organisation. It answers those vital questions: who talks to whom, how often and why. One apparently well-managed high-tech business was once analysed in this way, a business school dean told me recently. It turned out that the head of R&D never came into contact with the finance director.

Even where social networks seem to be operating well, there can be problems. McKinsey consultants Lowell Bryan, Eric Matson and Leigh Weiss wrote last year: "As tens of thousands of individuals search for knowledge and productive personal relationships in social networks, they generate much of the overload of e-mails, voicemails, and meetings that make today's large companies more complex and inefficient." The authors argued that, paradoxically, it may be necessary to introduce formal structures to exploit the creative informality of networks.

There are other dangers here too. Networks sound so cool, so 21st century, that they must by definition always be beneficial, right? But some networks will exclude as many people as they include. They may not automatically lead to greater collaboration, openness and innovation, but rather support the growth of narrow, sterile cliques.

In a new paper for the London-based think-tank Demos, Peter Bradwell and Richard Reeves consider the subtly varying experiences of today's "network citizens" at work. The concept of networking might suggest freedom and meritocracy, they say. But the reality could reflect simple discrimination and prejudice.

"[Networks] can help to diffuse power away from hierarchical structures - but they can hoard power for themselves too," they write.

Yes, times are tough and, nervously, many people will be flicking through contact books, databases and Facebook entries to see who in their immediate circle could be of extra use to them right now. Your network of friends and contacts may save you, it is true. But it won't necessarily perform miracles. They're only human. As Mr Bradwell and Mr Reeves point out: "Networks are ultimately only as good or bad as the people who constitute them."

Fonte: Financial Times, London, October 28 2008, Primeiro Caderno, p. 14.

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