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Is your professional network working for you?

As the end of the year comes into sight, it's natural to take stock of how your career is going. Formally or informally, we all wonder whether we are treading water or gaining traction and what we need to do differently. One question that is well worth asking yourself, but is unlikely to turn up in any formal appraisal, is how well your professional network is working?

At their best a professional network can be a source of smart counsel, new business, fresh ideas, resources, growth opportunities, support and the elusive inside track. At their worst, they are a tedious merry go round of stale conversations, people and sandwiches. As one client quipped to me his network was more of a 'notwork'.

Professor Herminia Ibarra at London Business School argues that many of us experience diminishing returns from our networks. This is primarily because we settle for what she calls 'networks of convenience'. This means we mainly connect with the people we meet most easily, who move in the same industry circles and are similar to ourselves. When we allow this to happen our network starts to act like an echo chamber, simply reinforcing our own views. Imagine the same ideas endlessly percolating like 2-day old coffee. It may be warm, mildly reassuring and easily available, but the enrichment quotient is negligible.

With Professor Ibarra's warning ringing in our ears, it's worth reflecting on how your network stacks up? If your network has primarily grown through convenience it may well be a cosy and predictable echo chamber but ideally you want more of a kaleidoscope. Tapping into your network should give you different colour on the issues of the day and help you seek out that invaluable contradictory opinion or connect you with people with different experiences.

If you think your network might need some fine tuning, here are three questions to help you pinpoint how you can shape your network to be a more rewarding resource.

Diversity not
digits

1. **How many people have you added to your professional network this year who are NOT in your industry, peer group, age group or geography?**

Don't be lulled into the numbers game. An impressive number of likes, followers or connections can still form an echo chamber – even if it's a large one!

Enriching not
static

2. **How have you enriched the lives of other people in your network?**

This isn't about being a 'good boy or girl scout'. Adding value and opening doors for others builds momentum and goodwill. Be known as a generous connector.

Future not past

3. **Does your network keep you grounded in the past or help you move towards the future?**

Old bosses and long past colleagues can be blind to our future potential. It's easy to have a network dominated with people who only see you in dated work identities. Ensure your network includes people who don't have a fixed view of you and your skills.

Is your network creating value for your business?

If your personal network is working well then how about upping the stakes and looking at how your organisation's network is functioning? Professor Ronald Burt's work on social networks at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, has analysed how an organisation's network can be a source of competitive advantage. Through network analysis he has explored why certain people, teams and businesses perform better than others.

Burt has demonstrated that social capital creates quantifiable value within organisations; a fact that should make it of interest to anyone who leads a team. Burt has shown that certain network structures drive coordination, learning, creativity and teamwork more than others. It's more than just using networks to get the work done. It's about delivering organisational learning, innovation, agility and ultimately performance improvement that would otherwise go untapped.

He characterises healthy networks as being open and moving ideas and data quickly around a system. In a healthy network there are no disconnected locations. There is at least some dialogue flowing between all the parts. Closed systems, by contrast are where different teams or geographies act as silos. These are black holes where no social capital can be generated. Not surprisingly, these networks are bad for innovation, communication and the exchange of market intelligence.

Reviewing the health of your organisation's network can reveal some interesting disconnects or blockages. Some opening questions to start with could be as follows:

Open or closed?

1. **How would you describe your organisation's network today?**
What pattern of connections exist across the business? Are there any black holes? Is there a fast or slow and consensual exchange of ideas?

Opportunities to connect

2. **Where does your organisation's network most need to evolve?**
Where are the disconnects in the system that are most costly to the business or, if connected, could provide the biggest opportunity?

Value creation

3. **Where could you enrich the network right now?**
Think about the professional bodies you participate in. People who have one foot in the company and one foot in the industry ecosystem can add value bringing external challenge into a business. What could you do?

So, if you are placing development bets for the year ahead, then focusing on your professional or organisational network is a smart option. Whatever your industry the simple act of taking a more deliberate approach to how you build, and use networks can provide rich returns.