

How to Maintain Your Professional Network Over the Years

Everyone knows it's important to build a network. But once you've made a connection with someone, how do you maintain it over the long haul so that you can call the person when you need help (e.g., a job reference or a professional favor)? How frequently should you be in touch with your contacts? And how do you balance efforts to bring in new people while staying in touch with those you've known for a while?

What the Experts Say

Networking is linked to many measures of professional success — including getting promoted, having influence, earning more money, and feeling more satisfied in your career. “[Research](#) shows that networks give people access to information, such as advice and problem-solving assistance, among other benefits,” explains Francesca Gino, a professor at Harvard Business School and coauthor of “[Learn to Love Networking](#).” “Over time, this information access helps people acquire the knowledge and competencies that are necessary to succeed at work and better handle challenges.” Your network not only helps you thrive in your current job; it also helps you uncover your next one, according to Dorie Clark, the author of *Reinventing You: Define Your Brand, Imagine Your Future*. “For most professionals, the job offers they receive and consulting offers they land are a direct result of their network,” she says. “If you're not staying in touch with people from your past, you're cutting off a lot of potential opportunities.” Here are some strategies for maintaining those ties.

Prioritize

First “make a clear-eyed determination about who in your network you want to prioritize,” says Clark. She suggests “grouping your contacts into buckets” of categories — for example, current clients, potential clients, influential and powerful colleagues, and “friends who are real connectors” — and then figuring how best to allocate your attention. But priorities aren't always clear-cut, adds Gino. There may be people you keep in touch with for no other reason than you enjoy their company or you have similar interests. “Think about the ways in which your relationships make [you] better off. If you're a happier person when you talk to a particular friend or colleague, make a point to do so on a regular basis,” she says.

Show you care

Next, Clark recommends thinking about the “different tools in your arsenal to stay in touch” — email, phone calls, coffee dates, social gatherings, and handwritten notes — and how you can best use these to nurture your relationships. The key to maintaining a professional network, she says, is to “be in the orbit” of the people you're trying to cultivate so that, if you require their assistance down the road, “you are still top of mind.” The best way to do this is to “take steps that demonstrate you care about the other person and that you're interested in his or her life,” she adds. “Be aware of when news or information triggers you to think of that person.” Perhaps you read a book a former colleague might like, you attended a lecture about a subject she's interested in, or you recently met a connection of hers. “That's a good time to

get in touch.” Adds Gino, “Good relationships need to be nurtured. If you care for that person to be in your network, you should avoid contacting him or her only in a moment of need.”

Be strategic with social media

In the Information Age, you can easily stay connected to people from your past for digital eternity but, cautions Gino, an over-reliance on social media to maintain your professional network can be dangerous. “Just like a phone call is not the same as conversing in person, social media has a different level of fidelity,” she says. “Sometimes social media tricks us into believing we have a strong connection with someone when, in fact, that connection only exists in that single plane of existence.” Still, adds Clark, you can use social media to your advantage. You might, for instance, trade direct messages with your contacts on Twitter, repost content they’ve created on LinkedIn, or re-tweet blogs and articles they’ve highlighted. Even better, “take the conversation off-line,” she says. “If you notice that your friend was just promoted or had some other success, celebrate her win by giving her a call or sending her a note.”

Offer to help

Another way to remain in good standing with your contacts is to “look for ways you can be helpful to them,” says Clark. “Listen carefully” to what they say and the challenges they face. “Perhaps your contact is struggling to help his son find an internship, and you know that your firm has them. Offer to make a connection. Perhaps your former colleague tells you she’s interested in starting to do more video at her job, and you just read a book on the subject. Send it as a gift.” Make sure your motives are pure, however. “Helping others is a fine thing to do, but doing so in order to gain favor only serves to demonstrate to those you intend to impress that you are shallow — the opposite of your goal,” says Gino. “Being genuine and authentic and sincere is much more likely to create a sense of respect.”

Don’t brag

Although it’s good for your network to know about your professional successes and promotions, [you don’t want to gain a reputation as a braggart](#). Gino recommends a milder form of self-promotion: simply “informing the other person about what you have been up to in a way that provides information he or she does not have.” Clark concurs. “You don’t need to bang the drum,” she says. “If you have had positive relationship with someone in the past and you’re confident she thinks you are a good person, you don’t need to go on a long-standing promotional campaign. Just stay in touch and express interest in her life. That’ll keep a positive memory alive.”

Don’t force friendships

If there is someone from your past that “you want to keep up with and you’ve tried multiple times but the other person just doesn’t seem to have that same desire,” it’s probably a sign to give up, says Clark. “Maybe he’s just really busy or his spam filter is particularly aggressive,” but it’s also likely he’s not interested in staying connected. Gino agrees. “Don’t become overly concerned with connections that aren’t mutual because, just as with other relationships, seeming desperate only makes you less desirable,” she says. She suggests trying to become friends with the person’s friends instead. “Play the long game but always be genuine,” she says. “Shallow connections are not worth the effort and can fade quickly.”

Regroup from time to time

Every six months or so, Clark recommends doing an “audit” of your professional ties. “You need to look at your list of contacts and ask, is it still accurate? Who should I add? Who is no longer quite as relevant?” Over time, Clark says, “you will cycle people” in and out of your network. This doesn’t mean you won’t talk to them, of course, it’s just not going to be as often. Bringing new people into your circle and staying in touch with longtime contacts “shouldn’t feel like a balancing act at all if you’re doing it well,” says Gino. “Continuously mix old and new when possible” — that is, introduce people you’ve just met to others in your network, which gives you an opportunity to learn more about both of them. “This opens up relationships that may have stagnated,” she adds.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Decide who you want to stay in touch with and how often you want to reach out
- Make use of all the communication tools in your arsenal, including email, phone, coffee dates, social gatherings, and handwritten notes
- Look for ways you can help your contacts with the professional and personal challenges they face

Don’t:

- Go overboard on social media. Be strategic about how you use it.
- Brag about your accomplishments
- Kill yourself trying to network with everyone you’ve ever met. Keep a running list of relevant contacts and audit from time to time.

Case Study #1: Stay in touch by offering to be helpful and expressing interest in your contacts’ lives

Omar Qari owes a good deal of his career success to the power of networking — particularly one networking event.

Back in 2011, when he was an MBA student at Wharton, he attended a talk by one of the founders of TechStars. Before the talk began, he found himself in conversation with Talia, a “bright and energetic” undergraduate. “We both shared a passion for mobile payment technology, and we were geeking out on it together,” he recalls.

Omar mentioned that he was looking for a summer internship with a startup, and Talia offered to introduce him to Charles, her former boss at Foursquare, the location-based search service mobile app. She did and Omar got the internship.

At Foursquare, Omar developed his own positive relationship with Charles, and he also met another developer, Ted Power, with whom he decided to found Abacus, an expense management service that helps companies reimburse employees.

When Omar returned to campus, he kept in touch with Talia. They emailed regularly and met for coffee from time to time. “We had both worked at Foursquare and it was fun to swap war stories,” he explains. “She also talked to me about how she was interested in moving into the investment space and I offered to help her think through the type of company she might like to work for.”

Omar also made it a priority to stay in close contact with Charles. “We emailed once a month, and we connected on the phone every other month,” he says. “I would leverage his professional expertise and bounce ideas off him. At that point, he was interested in doing something in an early-stage startup, and he was experiencing it vicariously through me.”

Charles eventually left Foursquare and moved on to Bessemer Venture Partners, an investment company. Not long after, Talia joined him. And, in 2014, just as Abacus was winding down its time at the Y Combinator accelerator, Bessemer became the first large-scale investor in the company.

It might be a stretch to say that chance encounter with Talia is what got Abacus up and running, but Omar says it’s not too off base either. “I think of Talia as the ultimate loose tie,” he explains. “We are not in constant touch now — she moved to the West Coast — but I know that if I called her, we’d pick right up where we left off. We are connected in so many different ways.”

Case Study #2: Ask questions and don’t self-promote

When Liz Graham moved to Boston she had an “ah-ha moment” about her life and career.

“I decided that I wanted to work at a company headquartered in the city, and I realized that I needed to expand my network,” says Liz, who had worked for many years in the cable industry in New York, and before that as a corporate attorney. “I needed to invest the time getting to know VC companies, local startups, and learning more about the players in the Boston scene.”

So she did everything she was supposed to do. She reached out to college and business school friends living in the city, she attended networking events and industry-specific seminars, she accepted invitations to speak on panels, and she got in touch with local executives and invited them for coffee.

But her most fruitful networking took place on the tennis court. She was out hitting balls one day when the man on the court next to her — named T.S. — asked if she was interested in a match. “As it turned out, we were both in job-hunting mode — he had just left Zipcar — and so between sets, we talked about the kind of environment we wanted to be in, what we love doing, and what opportunities we were looking for.”

Liz talked about her career but not in a self-promotional way. “It’s a delicate balance,” she says. “I tend to ask a lot of questions. I probe the other person. Naturally they will ask me questions, and that’s when I talk about my story and experience.”

Liz and T.S. traded email addresses. Soon, T.S. landed a job as the controller at Wayfair, the online furniture company, and Liz got a job at Hubspot, the marketing and sales platform. Over the next few years, the two stayed in touch. They would play tennis from time to time and exchange emails about their jobs and lives. T.S.'s child went to the same school that Liz's children had, and she often inquired about how the child was doing. She also reached out to him on social media. "When Wayfair had its earnings, I would send him a note of congratulations," she says.

When Liz saw that Wayfair's vice-president of sales and service position was open, she was immediately interested and again reached out to T.S. He helped provide an introduction to the hiring manager, which jumpstarted the interview process, and Liz eventually got the job. She acknowledges that she has her tennis hobby to thank for it. "When you're doing something you love," she adds, "networking feels easy."

Knight, Rebecca. "How to Maintain Your Professional Network Over the Years". *Harvard Business Review*. 2016. hbr.org/2016/09/how-to-maintain-your-professional-network-over-the-years. Accessed February 6, 2020.