

NETWORKING

Start Networking with People Outside Your Industry

by Dorie Clark
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Most professionals build their network over time through proximity — people from your business school study group, or colleagues from your current company or past jobs. You may have a few outliers in the mix, but unless you’ve been deliberate about your networking, the vast majority of people you know probably work in the same field or industry as you. It may seem innocuous, but that inadvertent myopia can put you at serious professional risk.

First, if your network has become too narrow, you limit your options in case of a career change, or a downturn in your company or industry. If coworkers are the only ones you know well, and you find yourself in the midst of layoffs, there's no one to turn to for outside assistance.

Additionally, you're more prone to groupthink if you're not exposed to diverse perspectives and points of view. As Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam has written, you need to have a balance of both “bonding capital” and “bridging capital” — i.e., relationships based respectively on your commonalities (bonding) and relationships built across differences (bridging). Relationships with those like you may feel more natural, but it pays to push beyond your comfort zone. Indeed, [research shows](#) that companies with more diverse boards enjoy better financial performance.

Dan, a senior professional I interviewed for my first book, *Reinventing You*, realized that he hadn't invested enough in his own “bridging capital.” He had spent a decade at a large technology company, rising to become an engineering director. But it occurred to him that his entire professional network consisted of people from that company. Given the vagaries of industry disruption, he became concerned.

He embarked on a networking campaign that forced him to meet each week with people outside the company, including executive recruiters, venture capitalists, startup entrepreneurs, and more. His connections allowed him to move to an exciting new job, and immediately prove his value thanks to the industry insights he'd gained from meeting with so many people.

To diversify your own network, here are four strategies you can follow.

Inventory your existing connections. First, take an inventory of your current network. Who are the 5-10 people you spend the most time with? Next, make a list of your “outer circle” — the 50 or so people who matter the most in your professional life. Do a quick scan to evaluate the professional diversity of your network, noting whether they're inside or outside your company, and whether they share your profession. If your network is weighted more than 70% in any direction (e.g., 85% of your closest contacts are fellow marketers), it's time to think consciously about how to diversify. Identify past colleagues or friends that you enjoy who are in different fields or work at different companies, but whom you haven't spent much time with. Take this as your cue to reach out and propose getting together; they'll often welcome the invitation.

Put networking on your schedule. Part of Dan's success in broadening his network outside his company was his decision to make networking a deliberate part of his weekly routine. As an introvert, he'd previously eschewed most networking events. But when he realized his circle had become dangerously small, he committed to regular breakfast meetings with new colleagues. Networking is never “urgent” and will often be the first activity jettisoned when things get busy at work, but it's essential to prioritize it by putting it on your schedule.

Ask for recommendations. Almost everyone’s network is overweight with people like themselves – so take advantage of this fact, and if you’re looking to diversify your professional relationships, ask the people who are outliers in your network to recommend people they think you should meet. You could say to them, “I’d like to know more angel investors, and you’re really plugged into those circles – who else do you think I should connect with? Would you be willing to make an introduction?”

Don’t look for immediate returns. Some people end up with a narrow network because of inertia, but others don’t extend themselves because they just don’t see the potential for return. If you work in finance, it’s true that making friends with a filmmaker is less likely to add to your bottom line than spending time with someone in your own industry. But you have to play the long game. People – including you – may change careers, and that connection may prove helpful down the line. Additionally, you can’t predict who will be in someone else’s network; that filmmaker may have gone to high school with a CEO you’d now like to do business with.

The best reason to build a professionally diverse network, however, isn’t about what you’ll get out of those relationships. It’s to fulfill personal curiosity and develop yourself as a person; professional or monetary ROI is a happy coincidence. For several years, I’ve been [hosting 8-10 person dinner gatherings](#) of interesting people from a mix of professions. It didn’t seem relevant that one of my friends was a comedian, and another a comedy promoter, until I started doing standup performances and was able to access helpful advice that saved me time and frustration.

It’s easy to coast through life only connecting with people like ourselves – but by expending the extra effort to increase our “bridging capital,” we’re gaining access to new insights and creating more “career insurance” for ourselves by broadening the ranks of people who know, like, and respect our work.

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