
Strategies for Developing Your Professional Network

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Although the value of professional career networking is well-established, it is often unclear how to approach it. In general, professional networking strategies should be tailored to your developmental needs, which requires reflecting on where you are in your career journey and where you want to go (see de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004). Apart from such individualized approaches, emerging research evidence points to three professional networking strategies that are likely to be effective for women and ethnic minorities (Chanland & Murphy, 2018).



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KEYWORDS

Professional
networking

Strategy #1 - Seek out demographically diverse connections.

People tend to form relationships with others who are similar to them, a phenomenon called the homophily tendency. For instance, women tend to have more connections to women, and men tend to have more connections to men, even though each gender is equally represented in the population. The homophily tendency can be detrimental for women in academia because it dampens the likelihood of connecting to men in academia, and having more men in one's professional network is associated with greater career satisfaction for early career women (Spurk et al., 2015). Thus, women may have to make more of an effort to connect to their male colleagues (Chanland & Murphy, 2018), but doing so can provide increased access to informal networks, especially if the men are higher-status or higher-ranking (Chang et al., 2021).

Strategy #2 - Identify sponsors.

A sponsor is a higher-status network contact who is willing to promote you to your professional community. A sponsor's role is to share your accomplishments, recommend you for a position or opportunity, connect you with members of their network, and correct biased or inaccurate information about you (Chow, 2021). As sponsors may act on your behalf in these ways, having a sponsor, particularly a male sponsor in male-dominated fields, also serves as a signal to others about your legitimacy in your professional sphere (Burt, 1998; Ramaswami et al., 2010). Moreover, sponsors can serve as role models, providing insights into how you might navigate your own career path (Chang et al., 2021). Some evidence suggests that having at least two sponsors tends to be more effective for career advancement (Higgins & Thomas, 2001). Thus, consider how you might develop multiple sponsors over time.

Strategy #3 - Engage in 360-degree networking.

While reaching up is valuable, it is just as important to engage with contacts below and at your status to form meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships (Ensher et al., 2002). These relationships are sources of both career advice and social support—for you and your network contacts—that contribute to career self-efficacy, or the belief in your ability to address challenges that arise. Thus, it is important to remember to not merely focus on developing strategic aspects of your network but also on developing meaningful, mutually beneficial professional relationships.

Your professional network is not only an avenue for advancing your career, but also a key source of developmental advice and social support. Enacted in concert, the three strategies described above can be useful for tapping into the inherent potential in your professional network, leading not only to objective success but also to a more meaningful and fulfilling career..

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