

FACT SHEET: Finding the Connection: How to Create and Use a Personal Network

One important strategy for personal success – both on the job and in volunteer work and organizations – is the ability to make connections and form networks. In the simplest terms, a network consists of individuals who share information, ideas or goals. Networking can be defined as making connections among peers.

Personal networks are informal, useful and fun. They can help everyone involved in the relationship through the exchange of information, skills and other resources. Sometimes informal networks develop into more structured coalitions or other groups.

This fact sheet will explore different types of networks, suggest guidelines for developing or expanding your own networks, explain a tracking system, and suggest ways to improve your networking skills.

INTRODUCTION

We all network, whether by seeking the resources we want or helping others meet their needs. Networks can connect one individual with another, an individual with an organization, or two or more organizations. However, it is individuals within these organizations who find the connections. There are family, social, professional, political, civic or volunteer, and religious networks. Can you identify some networks that you already participate in?

Networks are usually informal. They seldom show up on organizational charts or reporting systems or in constitutions or by-laws. Personal initiative and trust are fundamental to these voluntary connections.

Networks serve a useful purpose. They provide assistance in acquiring information, services, support and access to people or other resources.

Sharing through networking benefits everyone involved in the relationship. It is not a way of manipulating or taking advantage of others: It is important to give help as well as to ask for it. Networks are based on cooperation rather than competition, monopoly or authority.

Networking is a process of acquiring resources and building capacity by creating and using links between two or more individuals, groups or organizations. It provides a valuable method for getting things done by serving as a basic communication and resource development tool.

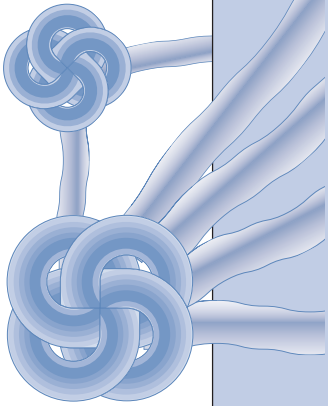
NETWORK EXCHANGES: INFORMATION, SKILLS, SUPPORT, ACCESS

Network participants get some kind of benefit from the connections they develop. An exchange takes place. The repayment need not be immediate or of the same type, as long as both contacts find the relationship worthwhile. In fact, network relationships rarely involve a one-for-one exchange (such as bartering) but rather a mutual respect for the other's ability to help when needed, as needed. Network relationships often continue even after an exchange has been completed because future exchanges are likely.

In forming a network, you should have a sense of what you are able and willing to give, as well as what help you expect. Once you begin to practice networking regularly, it will become second nature to you to look for connections yourself and to link with others for possibilities of exchange.

FINDING THE CONNECTION

What is exchanged in a network relationship? There are four kinds of help or resources you might gain from network contacts: information, skills, support and access.¹



INFORMATION is generally regarded as the most valuable kind of help, especially if it is current information that is not yet generally known or is difficult to find.

SKILLS make up the second type of exchange in networks. This category includes skills and services that contacts can either locate or offer themselves.

SUPPORT is the third kind of help offered in networks. It can take many forms, from such simple acts as giving encouragement or recognizing someone else's accomplishment, to more complex forms, such as building alliances and coalitions. Support networks help people avoid or solve problems.

ACCESS to other networks is the fourth type of exchange. Access can be described as the process of referring one contact to a group of others. With strong, extensive networks, you are better able to provide (or receive) this kind of help.

ENHANCE YOUR NETWORKING SKILLS

Some characteristics or actions that strengthen your ability to network include assertiveness and a willingness to take some risk. Effective networkers are initiators; they identify their goals and connections to help accomplish them. They are also good communicators, able to listen and to express their own views.

You may already have experience with personal networks, such as locating people who share family and consumer experiences. Networking techniques also work in professional or volunteer situations, as well as when addressing public issues. You can strengthen your networking skills in many ways. For example:

- Attend meetings on topics that address your concern.
- In addition to listening when you attend meetings, talk to as many people as you can about their ideas and what they do. To start with, if you feel hesitant and shy, just set a goal of talking to one or two people.
- Carry a small notebook for writing down ideas, people's names, and how to contact them.
- Hand out your business or personal card. This serves as an invitation to call on you. Even volunteers benefit by having cards, using a "job title" such as "community volunteer" or "child care fund raiser." You can have cards printed or use an address label on a plain stock card.
- Think of yourself as a resource. Be willing to help others who are looking for information and skills you have or know how to find.
- Prepare a short, clear statement to explain what you do (at work, as a volunteer, or as a community citizen).
- Study how the group or system works. Don't let special words or names intimidate you. Ask questions. Seek answers. Let the decision makers know who you are and that you are interested in a specific project or issue.
- When asking for help, be specific. Say that "I want advice about _____," or "I am looking for a contact person who can _____."
- Form a study group with a goal of taking action. If a group already exists, join and participate in it.
- When you or your group begin thinking about a project or activity, include time to develop networking lists as part of your planning process.

¹ These categories were proposed in *Networking*, FCL 311, a publication of the Family Community Leadership Program, 1985.

Keep on Track

The challenge is not simply to develop contacts but to develop useful contacts and use them. Balance what you get with what you give. An important part of getting organized is developing an efficient tracking system. A mixed up pile of cards is not very helpful. Develop a method that works for you. Consider this example:

FRONT SIDE OF CARD**Tracy Thomas**

General Manager
Garden Center
100 Wheat Lane
Sunflower City, KS 60000
785-555-1200
e-mail: tt@oz.oznet.com
http://garden.com

2/15/99
met at lawn & garden
show
likes outdoor activities

Referred to Kelly Jones,
Chairperson of Community
Health Fair

1. Use 3 x 5 cards, a Rolodex system, or a computer listing.
2. Paste business card on front side or write the same information.
3. Note where you met, what you talked about.
4. Note whether you got a referral or if you were referred to someone.
5. Describe other interests discussed.



1. Keep track of contacts – when phoned, when seen, what was said.
2. Note any promises in another color ink. Were those completed?

BACK SIDE OF CARD

2/20 Called Tracy Thomas

2/23 Called to say thanks. Will
send note.

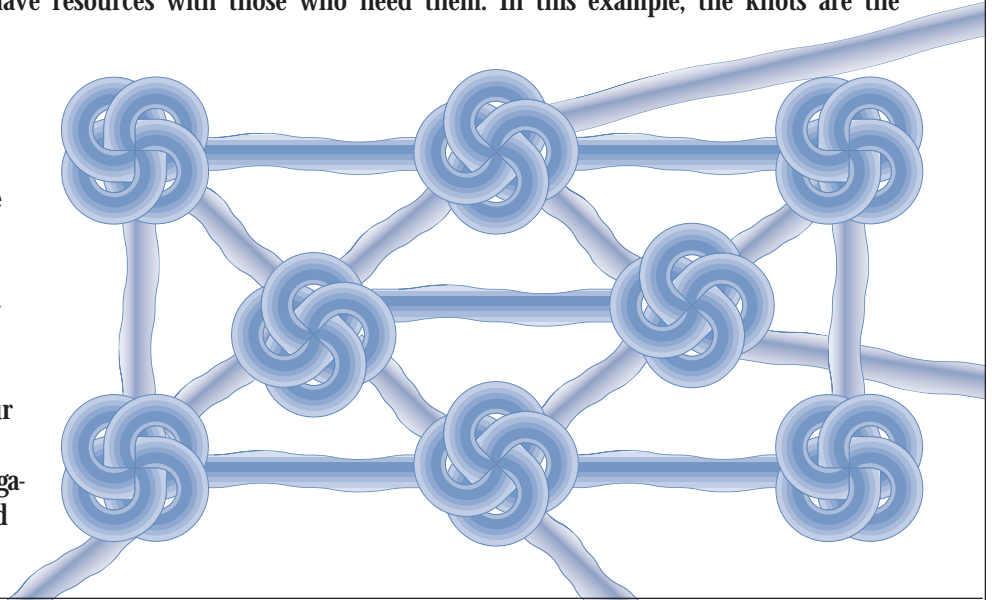
* Promised to send article on his
tory of county health fairs.

2/26 DONE

Another part of getting organized is to decide whether you are a **node** or a **link** – or both.² Nodes are the entry points – the recipients of information or other resources. Links serve as the connections between the nodes, the people who connect those who have resources with those who need them. In this example, the knots are the nodes; the strands are the links.

What linking functions have you served? Between which two nodes? How did you make the connection?

Review your lists regularly to update and expand the information. Revise the categories to adapt them to fit your situation more precisely. As interests change, networks grow, and other needs arise, you may need to add or drop people's names from your network lists. Whether you keep them on cards, in a computer, or organized in some other way, they should be handy, and you should use them.



SUMMARY

Confidence in your ability to create connections comes with practice. The support of an understanding friend or group is invaluable as you begin. Work toward specific goals when you ask for information or help. In networking, everyone wins by sharing.

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Acknowledgment

Appreciation is expressed to Libby Curry, Katherine Friesen, Janice Frahm, Stan McAdoo, Ron Wilson and Carol Young for their review of this publication.

² Forum Magazine, "Networks: A Matrix For Exchange," March, 1983.