Build skills, not contact lists: How to be an effective networker in digital era

A key factor that defines success is the approach to networking—are you connecting to give or to take?

Consider the following scenario: you work as a sales manager in a fast-growing company, and over the last few years you have performed consistently well and exceeded expectations. It is the beginning of the financial year. Top management recognizes your potential and decides to give you a promotion, a raise and a role change: In line with the organization's vision of entering new markets, you are now required to unlock growth in a new geography. This means you will shift countries and relocate to an alien land, with the intent of establishing your firm's footprint in that country. You are excited and anxious at the same time. Excited to be given this opportunity for growth and anxious because you will start from scratch: new team, unknown market, strange culture and unfamiliar territory. It is time to unlearn and relearn.

However, you are not completely alone as you attempt to scale this precarious peak. Your organization has great products and offers cutting-edge services, and you have the support of your team back home. Yet, you are required to hit the ground running from day one. What is the first thing you do? If you are like most networkers, you will put together a plan to uncover which of your potential buyers and influencers are active on social media. You will follow them on professional networking platforms and get to know more about their likes, tastes and behavioural patterns.

If you are an effective networker, you will first start by honing your skills. Before you dive in to building your network through social platforms, you will first build your subject matter expertise and figure out how you can be of value to your new connects. Only then will you engage with them and share information they perceive to be useful. Over time, you will shift your virtual connects into physical ones as you try to fix in-person meetings and pitch your products and services to them.

If you do this right, in a matter of a few months, you will find that your network has grown, you've made your first big sale, and there is a "multiplier effect"—you are getting introduced to others. As you sincerely try to add value to your network, you find that your network is helping you right back.

Networking done right

While it is true that today's hyper-connected age allows us to instantly connect with anyone around the world, what we do before and after a connection has been established can be the difference between winning and losing. Deep connects are built when we have something special to offer—a unique skill that sets us apart from others. Psychologist Adam Grant explains this in his podcast "Worklife": "You don't have to start by building your contact list. You can start by building your skills. Because having expertise to share sets you up to connect with interesting people."

The other critical factor that defines success is your orientation to networking—are you connecting to give or to take? Research shows that while givers and takers may have equally large networks, givers add more value to their networks, reinforce their reputation and expand their universe of possibilities. As LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman points out, "It seems counter-intuitive, but the more altruistic your attitude, the more benefits you will gain from the relationship."

Fostering 'boundary-less connections'

Speaking for Big Think, author Erica Dhawan narrates the story of how Colgate struggled to solve the mechanical problem of fluoride getting stuck in manufacturing equipment.

KNOLSKAPE

Despite engaging all the top chemists in the organization and pouring thousands of dollars into solving the issue, the challenge remained unresolved for months. Eventually, the company ended up posting details of the problem in InnoCentive, the open innovation and crowdsourcing platform that brings together scientists from all over the world. According to Dhawan, a physicist from Canada looked at the problem online and said that it was a physics problem and not a chemistry problem, and shared details on how to solve it, leading to an instant resolution for Colgate.

This story teaches us a couple of lessons about the value of fostering "boundaryless connections" both within and outside the organization. First, Colgate never got to asking its own physicists to solve the issue because it was labelled a chemistry problem. The firm was limited by its own sense of internal boundaries and defined the problem within a narrow construct. Second, the open innovation platform allowed the organization to leverage connections outside, thereby allowing an external subject matter expert to weigh in on the subject and provide a solution.

The digital age calls for developing a fluid mindset, i.e. the ability to think both inside-out and outside-in and be hyper-aware of trends both inside and outside the organization. To accomplish this, we must learn to intelligently hone and leverage networks, and achieve common goals relevant to all stakeholders.

Rajiv Jayaraman is the founder-CEO of learning and assessments platform KNOLSKAPE, and the author of Clearing the Digital Blur, and Subramanian Kalpathi is senior director at KNOLSKAPE and author of The Millennials: Exploring The World Of The Largest Living Generation.

Click here *to view the original article*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rajiv Jayaraman is the CEO & Founder of KNOLSKAPE

Rajiv provides overall leadership and direction in strategic areas such as customer success, product roadmap, talent acquisition and growth strategy. After experiencing the power of a differentiated learning intervention during his MBA days at INSEAD, he founded KNOLSKAPE in 2008 with the vision of helping corporates maximize the potential of their people talent, using technology as an enabler.

Under Rajiv's leadership, KNOLSKAPE has grown into a leading player in the talent transformation space, with 200+ clients across 17 countries.

He brings focus on meeting the needs of the company's global customers, and constantly strives to achieve ever higher levels of organizational excellence and customer satisfaction by encouraging responsibility and accountability at all levels.

A Thought Leader and a TEDx speaker, Rajiv is a visiting faculty at SP Jain Center of Management, Singapore and Dubai, and has delivered guest lectures at INSEAD, IIM-Bangalore, IIT-Madras, IIFTDelhi, NMIMS and MICA. He is frequently invited for corporates and industry events to speak about building digital mindsets, managing innovation, and modern workplace learning. He has been featured in The Economic Times, Business Standard, CNBC Young Turks, ET Now, Digital Learning magazine, Entrepreneur magazine and Yourstory.in.

Prior to founding KNOLSKAPE, Rajiv worked at Oracle USA in the server technologies division.

Rajiv earned his bachelor's degree in Computer Science from BITS Pilani, Master's in Computer Science from University of Alabama, Huntsville, followed by an MBA from INSEAD. He enjoys playing musical instruments and has keen interest in theater and film making.