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Blueprint for change

In the first of two articles, **Patrick O'Brien** explores the far-reaching benefits of networking, and how it can be used as a powerful and productive relational tool

Networking starts with a focus on investment. Great networkers treat their network like a bank account, considering each connection as a relationship invested. They weigh up its value captured in their 'balance sheet', long before they consider their actions reflected in the 'P&L'.

They are always able to provide an assessment of the current quality of their network. They can also list the activities underway that help them plan, nurture and develop its growth over time.

In this article, we'll explore the benefits of networking, positioning it as a productive relational tool. This is powerful from a business and professional standpoint, as networking can be used for client maintenance, and practice development purposes.

It can also be used to achieve personal objectives, and we'll exemplify this using networking to secure a new job.

The approach to networking in both cases is similar. It draws on soft skills, especially those emotionally intelligent skills linked to attitude and capability.

Networking mindset

Attitude counts, and is often the biggest impediment to productive networking experiences. You need to have the right mindset to engage effectively. It is probably the one major mental barrier that you'll need to overcome in order to realise results.

You'll also need to develop the right skill sets, ones that allow you to execute with confidence, and fluency. These tend to be communication skills-related, allowing you to freely circulate around a room, initiating and maintaining interesting conversations as you go.

Great networkers use contemporary social networking tools too. In a subsequent article, we'll look at how you may be able to network more

intelligently when using social media.

We'll also consider networking more from that 'balance sheet' perspective, assessing and measuring the quality of your networking asset and the steps you can take to grow it.

What networking is and is not

I recently attended a business event, jammed in at the end of a busy day. The evening's topic was interesting, and I knew I could catch up with some people who would be there.

Arriving a little early, my timing was good. This afforded me opportunities to observe others as they arrived and went about their business.

around, gathering, eating and talking, this person quickly milled around the room. He would approach a group, chat for a moment or two, then hand over his folders, then quickly move on to another group.

He left a distinctive trail of yellow folders in his wake and my curiosity got the better of me. I approached one group to enquire of the folder's content. They told me that each folder contained his résumé.

I went over to the man distributing folders to chat and discovered that his company had been restructured and his job had disappeared. Though retrenched, his firm had the

YOU NEED TO TAKE ACTION TO DEVELOP 'WEAKER TIES' THROUGH NETWORKING, OTHERWISE NEW POSSIBILITIES WILL REMAIN OUT OF REACH

As is often the case, many people arrived late and made a beeline for the food. They took time out to eat, chatted in small circles prior to their early departure, timed well before the scheduled end.

Yes, they attended a networking event, but was that really networking? Good networking requires the right mindset, yet many still see it as an inconvenience. When they attend events, they seem devoid of purpose. And though they accept all associated costs, it's not clear whether and where they ever realise benefits.

Transactional or relational

Back at the event that evening, I noticed a man with a colourful bunch of folders under his arm as I entered the room. Being bright yellow they caught my eye immediately. However, it was his actions that really drew me in.

While most people were standing

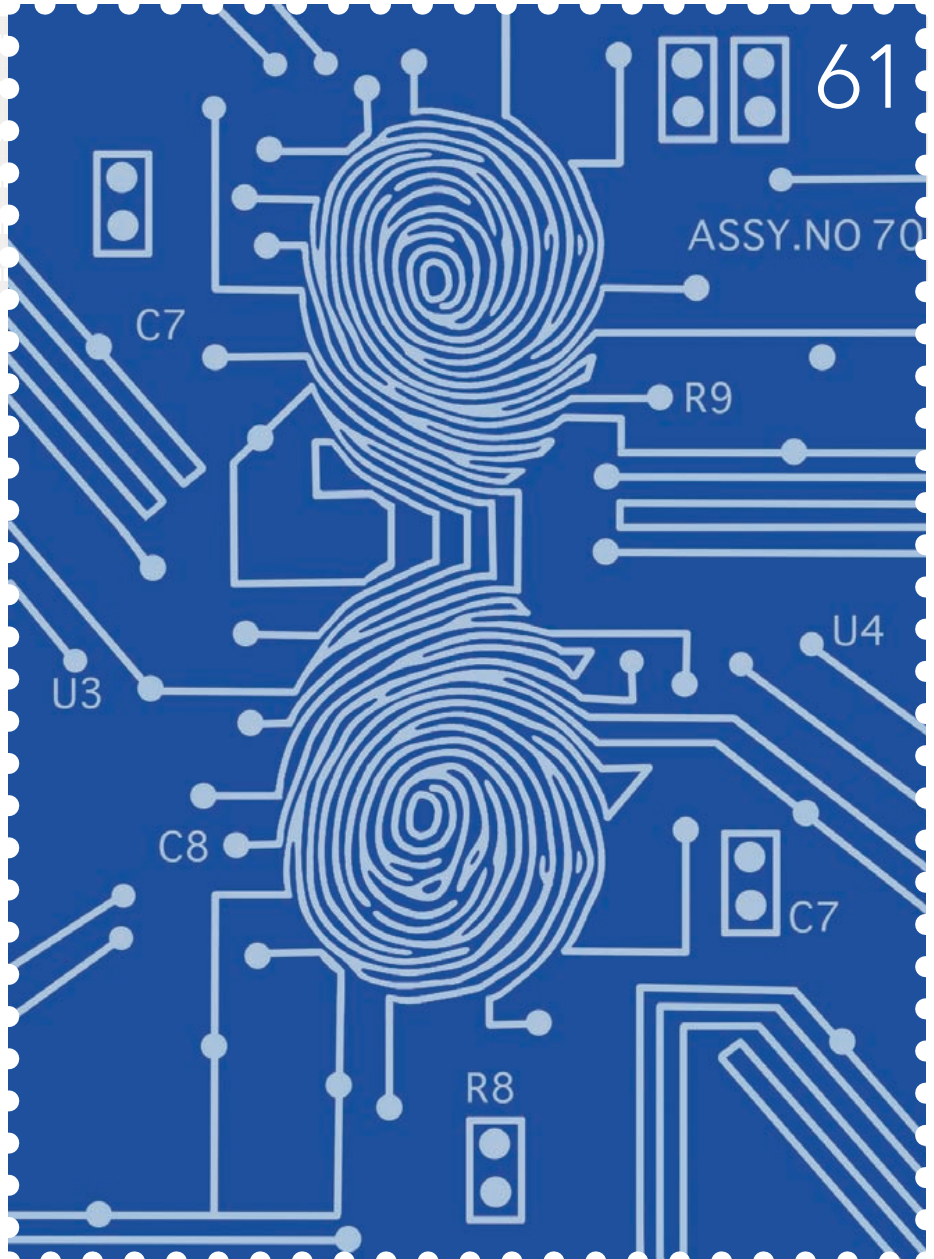
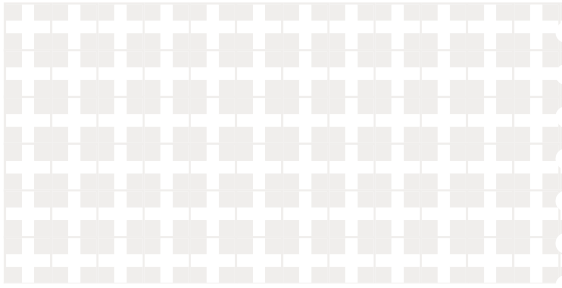
consideration to provide him access to outplacement services and he was utilising these resources to the max.

He had a really positive outlook and had already built a solid résumé by reflecting on his past career. He also demonstrated great courage in putting himself about, continuously breaking ice with new contacts at the event. These were all productive things to do.

However, when I asked: 'Why are you doing this?', his answer was insightful. He replied apologetically: 'I'm only networking because I've just lost my job.'

Taking ownership and control of your life through action is always a great positive choice. However, though he thought he was networking, he was really only job hunting.

Job hunting is transactional, and is something that many people do in despair. Often they do it in the absence of an existing network asset. They



spend time today trying to redress issues that occurred yesterday.

In contrast, networking is relational and based around nurturing existing network assets. It is an investment decision taken today that realises beneficial and desired returns from network relationships tomorrow.

Building relationships

It is easy to make this mistake and treat networking in a purely transactional sense. To be effective, however, networking should be treated as an investment of time, in order to build a set of trusted relationships.

It should be a positive, purposeful and productive process that builds a safe, engaging environment that allows for the sharing of information.

When performed well, networking is an immensely productive channel, opening up many new possibilities. Who you know does count, but the better opportunities often arise from the most unexpected relationships.

You probably believe that the people you know well deliver your best opportunities. You also believe that it is relationships with your closest friends and associates that bring the most gain; they know best who you are, what you do and what you want.

You may also feel that those close by in your network are the ones most strongly willing you on to succeed. These are logical assumptions, yet some networking channels are more powerful than others.

For instance, when it comes to filling vacancies, research indicates that the least likely route is directly through adverts. Some studies suggest that the direct route may be effective only 20% of the time.

Rather, around 60% of vacant positions are more likely filled through personal 'connections'. Reinforcing this

point, a 2006 Chartered Management Institute poll found that more than 60% of members rated networking as an important option for career development opportunities.

Mark Granovetter's 1974 study, *Getting a Job*, added some powerful insights too. He found that of all personal connections in your network, the strongest associations were often the least fruitful. In contrast, occasional and rare contacts were more likely to realise the most value.

His rationale was simple. Close friends share the same world as you. They occupy similar spaces with similar opportunities to those you already know.

New possibilities are likely in greater abundance within your occasional and rare connections. Granovetter concluded that 'weak ties' in your network are often more productive, as they occupy a world that differs radically from the one

where you normally operate.

So you need to take action to develop 'weaker ties' through networking, otherwise the distant world of new possibilities will remain out of reach. Great networkers do not limit the focus of their network investments to activities related only around a close circle of friends.

In conclusion, effective networkers adopt the right mindset and gain the relevant skill sets. They move to a more relational approach, which makes networking a more pleasurable and beneficial experience.

They also make networking work for them by constantly thinking about the quality of their network assets; who is in it, and how they can extend its reach, especially to 'weak ties'.

We'll look at how to measure and grow this asset next time.

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