



Branching out

On the face of it a contender for a senior executive post who holds a wide and active network of contacts would seem an attractive proposition for the business. They may, however, fly the nest more readily once their quest for growth and development is satisfied, says Claudia Jonczyk an associate professor of Organisation Behaviour at ESCP Europe

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that networking is important. It has been shown that potential recruits who know somebody at the company they are in recruiting talks with manage to negotiate a significantly higher starting salary compared with people who do not have a similar link. Once hired and part of the organisation, people who occupy central network positions where they act as brokers between different groups or departments have better performance evaluations, are promoted faster and earn higher salaries than those who are more on the periphery of the organisational network.

How individuals network goes beyond broad generalisations and

overall recommendations like “get your name out there”, “identify and talk to the ‘important’ people” or collecting a huge number of business cards. We need to know whether we can distinguish between different networking strategies and, if so, what the implications are in terms of talent management and HR support.

These are questions my colleagues Ben Bensaou and Charles Galunic from INSEAD and I have been focusing on in our latest research on networking types. We have found that there are different ways of networking even at the very same career level.

Game players

You could also call them ‘master networkers’, for whom networking seems to be a way of life. They

network all the time – and with everybody: clients, partners, team members, peers, outside contacts. On top of this, they are highly conscious of the potential benefits of networking and exhibit a very active, instrumental, almost calculative approach towards networking. What sets them apart from the rest of the crowd is the high degree of exploration, their ‘the more the merrier’ approach which results in them having by far the biggest networks, with the highest number of external contacts and the highest number of political buy-in contacts. Game-players forge strong ties with a handful of selected peers with whom they swap resources and strategic information – a few carefully selected ‘high return’ peers are part of their networking strategy.

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Trade-off makers

While trade-off makers are also aware of the importance of networking, they feel they cannot juggle all the balls at the same time so they set priorities and make choices. In a consulting/auditing context this translates into a preference to make it to the top by focusing their networking efforts on partners: a more internal networking strategy as opposed to external networking (ie, clients). Their emphasis is on ‘schmoozing’ with partners versus going to great lengths to make clients happy with extensive client socialising.

Low keys

For ‘low keys’, networking is mostly focused on the present and is need based. Overall, they are less active on all networking dimensions except for the team focus. Two reasons may contribute to their overall lower networking activity. They tend to spend a lot of time with their employees and have less time to branch out and network. The root cause for this may lie in their rather critical attitude towards networking: they don’t really like it; they perceive networking to be somehow artificial. We also find that this group has worked for fewer prior employers than the other two networking types. This could be because networking is seen as a learning experience, with those who have seen how the game is played at different companies being better at it than those who have experienced longer term employment with fewer organisations.

Recommendations

On initial assessment employers are very keen to identify the game players and get them on board. A word of caution: if game players have the largest networks with a wide number of external contacts, they may

also be the first to discover the grass is greener elsewhere.

Your game-players should be given the exposure and the spotlight they seek. They thrive by taking on a liaison role within an organisation. Make sure to offer them the variety they value in terms of projects and assignments which will help you maintain the loyalty of your master networkers but not make yourself dependent on them.

What your trade-off makers will value more than anything else is any support to help them juggle the different stakeholders they have to manage. Once they are getting better and better at this, chances are they will feel more at ease in their manager role.

There is a misconception that low keys are some kind of ‘lone wolf losers’. They have done very well in the past, survived an up-or-out selection system and been identified as potential partner material. Yet as an employer you may have to think about giving them more support. A key skill they have to become more proficient in is the art of delegation. Only when they are comfortable enough to delegate as much as possible to their teams will it free up time to focus on other key networking contacts. Assist them in branching out more.

You may want to create informal opportunities to broaden their networks or approach it through a more formal programme. This could be through institutionalised mentoring or godparent programmes where each new project manager has a more senior mentor who has been through the same recent challenges.

Our data has shown that all the three profiles can make it to the top. The game-players, however, on average a good year to 18 months before any of the low-keys. Also, the game-players are probably much happier on their way

to partnership. Compared to the low-keys they feel much more embedded in the company and have a higher sense of role clarity. So, you don’t have to be a game-player to make it to the top but the chances are you will enjoy the ride to the top much more if you are. ■

