

Leverage that network to get ahead

 By [James Maposa](#)

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Interesting thing about Africa today is that there's a lot of us out there who are now educated. This implies that one can no longer differentiate oneself through education. I do, however, say this within context. You do need to have relevant qualifications for specific jobs. So if we're all now super educated, where do we turn to get an edge and sustain whatever lead we have?

A few years ago I bumped into a very interesting gentleman who was working for a leading global strategy consultancy company who had just completed his MBA. In our deliberations, he mentioned that he hadn't really learnt much from a coursework standpoint and just went through the motions to get the paper. For him, the value had come from the relationships he had built during his two year MBA academic journey. This was a network that had exposed him to new and exciting opportunities. That for him was where he had and was still getting his return.



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I identified with his statements through another real life experience. A few years ago, one of my colleagues, an account manager in our business development got a life-changing call from a fellow MBA ex-student. The call was to invite our colleague to come and assist him to build his new and exciting venture whose progression was moving at the speed of light. This phenomenal growth had warranted him to reach out to bring on more hands on deck, particularly in a leadership role to assist him to steady the ship. Obviously there was a lot of risk involved, because it was in a way a startup, but who among us today wouldn't have wanted to be co-CEO of Groupon?

The example above speaks to a statement that's often dropped in many of the discussions that I have these days: it isn't about what you know, it's about who you know. Gone are the days when a robust CV got you that job or first entrepreneurial opportunity, because most of us have one. We now have chartered accountants winning the Two Oceans marathon, medical doctors that play rugby professionally, DJs with law degrees and beauty pageant winners with master's degrees. So most have risen to the occasion on the academic front and now have CVs that any of their kith and kin would be proud of.

Invest in relationships

It is the relationships where we're falling short. For most, the alarm bell of nepotism starts to ring and rightfully so. I do, however, like to think of this as "constructive / objective nepotism". As mentioned initially, most have responded to the

education call, delivering superb results. In addition, they've also gone out there and accumulated noteworthy experience. It is when they need to jump to the next thing or take the next step that it often comes to a grinding halt. They don't know anyone besides their fellow colleagues and their employers' client contacts (professionally). This limits their prospects to leveraging what they have to get ahead. But all of us now have what you have, so what's your differentiator? Back to the drawing board for you.

However, if you do put yourself out there to establish relationships outside of work based on your area of interest / industry where you feel you can make significant change (including the entrepreneurial front), you're creating luck for yourself. The more hands you shake in the name of your craft, the more people out there who remember you within that area's context. Take chances, stand up and address crowds regarding your area of interest. Sometimes you'll get it wrong. Sometimes your narrative will be ridiculed and other times you'll be spot on. Your investment in networking results in social currency, which can someday be converted into opportunities of real and commercial value.

I come back to my "objective nepotism" concept. Through your network, if it is asked whether they know of anyone who understands a given topic / subject / concept very well and it is up your alley, who do you think they're going to call? Lastly, the quality of your network is an aspect that one should also take into consideration. An endorsement from a heavy hitter within a department / organisation / industry is all one needs to secure an opportunity that could change your fortunes for a lifetime. So go out there and network – be brave, be bold, be smart...

ABOUT JAMES MAPOSA

Maposa is the founder and managing director of Birguid, a research and advisory company. Maposa has 15 years work experience, mostly spent in research and strategy consulting. Maposa is passionate about socio-economic development, business growth and continuity.

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