

Change how you think about networking and boost your career

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Women underestimate how much networking can help them in their careers, boosting their chances of promotion and climbing the career ladder, writes Kumeshnee West, Director of Executive Education at the UCT Graduate School of Business.

Many professional women don't like to network and readily admit to avoiding it – this despite the fact that networking is recognised as a foundational skill for career success.

“Networking is a lot like nutrition and fitness,” [says](#) Professor Herminia Ibarra from the INSEAD Business School. “We know what to do, the hard part is making it a top priority.”

“There are many misperceptions about networking – including that it is too self-promotional,” agrees Liz de Wet, a leadership development expert and convenor of the Executive Women In Leadership programme at the UCT Graduate School of Business in South Africa. There is also [research](#) to suggest that the reality of being outnumbered by men in some business and industry environments really does make it more difficult for women to network primarily because of the well-established social science principle of “like attracts like”. It takes longer for women to find common ground, which means that cultivating these relationships may feel less spontaneous and more like hard work.

“As a result, women will often tell me that they prefer working in their hotel room to going to the conference dinner,” says De Wet. “But ironically, the chat over a meal with a colleague may help them in ways that all the extra work might not have done.”

Networking is about connecting to and with others in a mutually generous and helpful manner, she says. “Many women feel uncomfortable in a scenario that looks like they are selling themselves, or engaging in superficial conversation for selfish reasons, but networking can be a generative, collegial, reciprocal and generous part of our work.”

For women who are serious about extending their contribution and impact and want to focus on their networking skills, De Wet says it can be helpful to reframe the way they think about it.

#1 - See it as work

Far too many women see networking as something they have to do over and beyond work. Women [work extremely hard](#) but are still only in [29% of senior leadership](#) positions at SA businesses. More effective networking could change that. De Wet suggests thinking about networking as being part of the job and to allocate time for it. “Delegate work you don't need to do yourself and rather make time to genuinely connect with a colleague,” says De Wet.

#2 – Make it about what you enjoy

Every time you visit a different branch of your organisation or a new location for work, take the time to get to know the people there, says De Wet. Meet as many people as possible and find genuine points of reference to have a real conversation about – something that you genuinely enjoy or are interested in. A conversation about music for instance or travelling to a jazz concert brings a level of humanity to a conversation during which meaningful and memorable contact can be made.

#3 – Don't rely too much on social media

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are good for establishing contact but for building quality relationships, you ideally need face-to-face time. Think about a current Whatsapp group you are on, if someone were to ask for a favour, how inclined would you be to help? Depends on how close the relationship is, right? Go out and meet people, make as many friends in your industry as possible. Don't shy away from going to events, conferences, drinks and dinners. See it as an opportunity to build your network. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

#4 – Don't think of it as using people

[Motivational speaker and author Samantha Ettus](#) says when she asks women at a gathering how many are good at networking, only about five will raise their hand. When she asks how many are good at helping, almost everyone puts up their hand. "Then I explain that networking is just a fancy word for helping. So if you are good at helping you will inevitably be good at networking." When you introduce someone, you are networking. Networking isn't about using people to get ahead but building relationships and developing connections, helping others who in turn, will want to help you.

#5 – Learn to recognise networking opportunities

Networking does not happen only at conferences or functions. It can be a conversation in an elevator or taking a break with co-workers. Often an informal gathering, like a lunch with colleagues, can be a space where [work issues are brought up](#). It can also be a good place to get to know your co-workers better, develop your communication skills and see people in a more meaningful light.

Networking is not only good for building your career, but it is also proven to making people feel [more connected at work](#), to each other as well as their organisation. It brings greater meaning and deeper engagement to the workplace and this in turn leads to greater satisfaction both personally and professionally.

The Executive Women in Leadership Programme runs at the GSB in Cape Town this July. For more information www.gsb.uct.ac.za/executive-women.

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