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# Do You Find Networking Stressful? Try Being a Connector Instead

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Sonia\*, a young associate brand manager, found networking a time

sink. She knew it was important for her career, but she felt awkward at mixers and conferences. She often found herself tongue-tied, not being able to go beyond ‘*What do you do?*’ She was stressed out trying to find time to build and maintain professional relationships to help her career. As a result, her network was weak and not one she could count on for help or advice.

If the word “[networking](#)” fills you, too, with dread, you’re not alone.

Plenty of research suggests that networking positively affects [career success](#). Having a strong and diverse social and business network leads to getting better [jobs](#), exposes us to innovative ideas and valuable new [arenas](#), and even helps us get [paid better](#).

While the traditional professional networking approach of attending events and reaching out for advice is helpful, it’s getting harder to build a strong, select network using this approach. Influential people are busy and less likely to meet someone lower on the social hierarchy. Many are bombarded by requests and have gatekeepers to guard their schedules.

What’s a better way to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of our network? Here is a tip: Be a *connector*.

## Why Be a Connector?

A connector is someone who brings us valuable insights, resources, or introductions. The more unique and useful these are, the more important the connector is. Think of a connector as a bridge: If there’s value on the other side, people not only want to use the bridge, they

have to use it.

Connectors bring value, so others often proactively approach them. Traditional networking is stressful because it has us *pushing* into other's people networks. Being a connector not only *pulls others to us*, it leads others to *pull us into their networks*. When connector roles or positions have some permanence, others reach out to us on a regular, often predictable, basis.

Professional networking with less stress is reason alone to try being a connector, but the research on [networks and social capital](#) shows that being a connector can be highly [advantageous](#). Connectors gain valuable access and visibility, resulting in higher odds of proposing good ideas, positive evaluations and recognition, higher compensation and faster promotions.

To be a connector, take a step back. Think about the kind of relationships you're looking for, keeping in mind you benefit the most from a network that is strong (those that are powerful and influential) and diverse (those that bring information or contacts that you don't already have). Then identify roles or positions where you can bring unique resources to others from within or from outside an organization.

## How to Be a Connector at Work

Let's look at Sonia's example again. She struggled with getting to know top executives in her company and influential people in the marketing industry. Reaching out to them for advice over coffee—the traditional approach—got little response.

Detecting a gap in the company's marketing knowledge, she proposed to her boss that she explore the millennial consumer market. Put in charge of the "millennial insights" project, Sonia became a connector. She had a compelling reason to interview company executives as well as outside experts and consultants. The more people she met, the more insights she gained—and could share—continually increasing her value. The VP of marketing asked to meet biweekly, and company leaders often contacted her after reading her insight reports.

When the VP created a new full-time role for that market, Sonia was the natural choice. She had also built a network outside the company, leading head hunters to approach her regularly about marketing jobs.

Becoming a connector worked for Sonia and works equally as well regardless the level you hold in an organization.

Julia\*, a senior director at a global technology firm, had been identified to succeed her VP, but was itching to explore a start-up. She also wanted to know her market value and job prospects, lest she suffer in a downturn. An active job search might have drawn unwanted attention, so she volunteered to coordinate work in her company's start-up and integration lab.

With more than 12 years at her company, Julia was well positioned to connect newly acquired companies to internal resources and departments, and vice versa. The part-time role landed her in-depth conversations, often over lunch, with management of the startups they acquired, venture capitalists, and top executives across her company.

Julia had become a connector, and was able to network within working

hours. High-profile people got to know her, and she quickly gained exposure to industry trends and the top issues her peers faced. When she eventually got promoted, the startup lab position was so valuable to her, that she continued to serve it in an advisory role.

## How to Be a Connector at School

Ben\*, a master's student, illustrates how even young people who feel they have no resources to offer can become connectors.

A year from finishing his degree, Ben wanted to land a job in the artificial intelligence space. Job fairs, career centers, class projects, and informational interviews did not move the needle. Ben created a monthly speaker series under the school's marketing club, inviting top marketing executives and experts to share their real-world experience in AI. To get started, he approached a professor at school, as well as alumni in the field, who were thrilled to help their alma mater and get publicity. The school and speakers were happy to retweet summary insights that he published.

The reputation of the series, and Ben as the lead, started to grow. And pretty soon thereafter, potential speakers started approaching him.

Before, during and after events, Ben took advantage of his position to network and build relationships with the speakers. That further deepened his knowledge and eventually led to a job offer. Rather than push into other people's networks, his connector role led others to pull him in.

## How to Avoid Connector Pitfalls

Being a connector takes effort, so it's important to assess the return on your time and energy. Here's a checklist of 5 things you should always keep in mind.

- Be strategic and get resources. Whenever possible, seek or obtain resources like headcount or budget, to ease the load.
- Control the positions that gives you access to key individuals. Be wary of doing all the hard work while someone else swoops in to take credit. For example, meet key stakeholders, in person if possible, on a regular basis to provide updates or seek their advice. Chair and run the meetings so it's clear you are leading. Being one level removed from the connector position and your benefits can drop significantly.
- Use opportunities to create visibility and **build a personal brand**. Don't cede seemingly small but important tasks, like sending out updates, that allow you to shape how your role is positioned and perceived. Repeated and broad exposure keeps you top of mind, and also prevents others from laying claim to your hard work behind your back.
- Be creative. If connector roles are occupied, create new ones. For example, look into roles in industry associations or special-interest groups, starting an online discussion board on a timely topic, curating valuable information or even managing a novel series of events.
- Finally, don't assume stakeholders know what you want or will flood you with opportunities. Being a connector might give you access and visibility, but when you want something, you need to ask.

Look for ways your connector role can gain institutional permanence,

which brings resources and generates repeated exposure. Due to [network effects](#), the reputation and value of a connector position can grow exponentially and become unassailable.

When managed strategically, your networking and career growth won't feel like a stressful action item tacked onto your already busy schedule. Instead, it will be fully integrated into your life through your connector relationships, woven tightly into your existing role, routine, and structure.

*\*All names and identifying details have been changed.*



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