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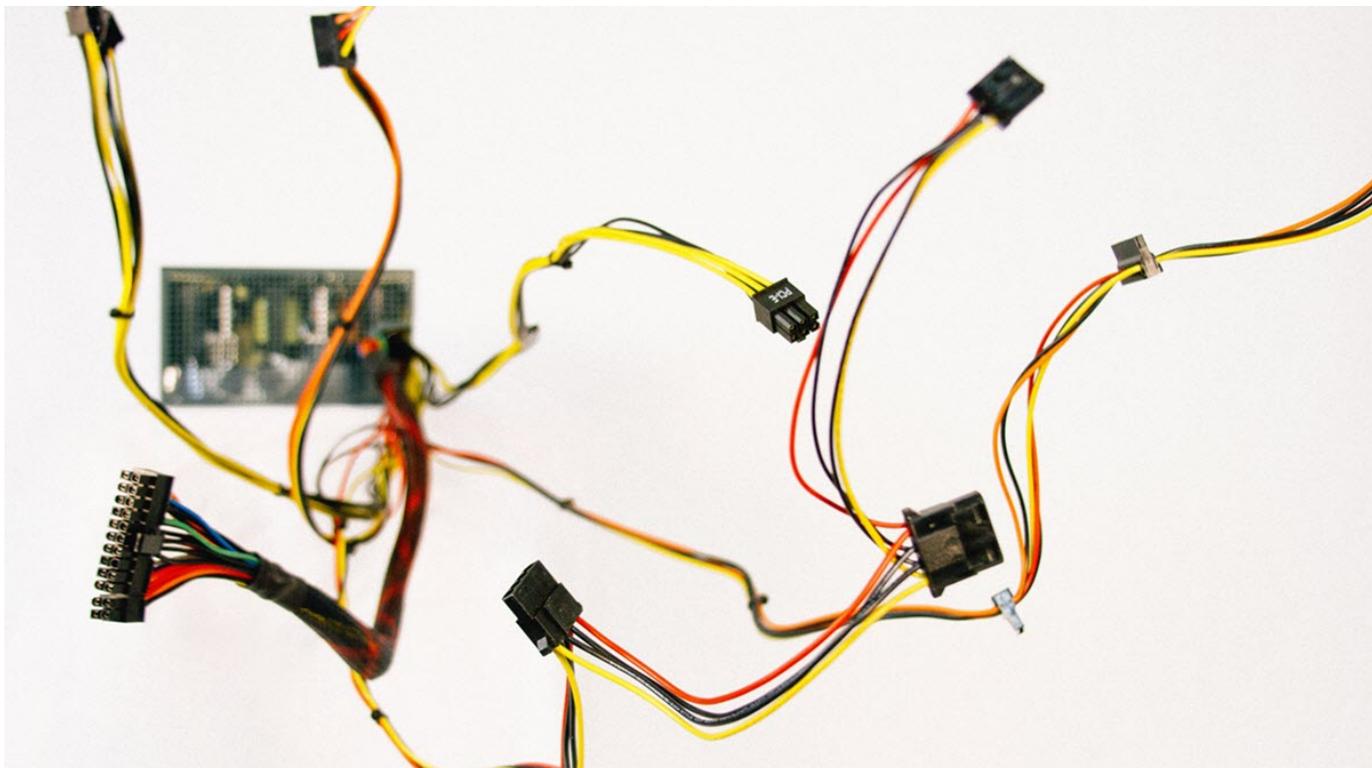
Why Your Professional Networking Isn't Working

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Michael C. Wenderoth

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Neil*, an ambitious young manager seeking to shift from an analytical

to a commercial role, finally got to meet the Senior Vice President (SVP) of a prominent marketing company. He had spent weeks getting the influential executive's attention, and then another month [scheduling a time](#) to meet.

Following their hour-long coffee, Neil and I caught up and he debriefed me on how their conversation went. I started by asking him the obvious question: "So what did you want to get out of the meeting?" Neil responded with a blank look. He had been wanting to switch industries and his job function, and the SVP could have quickly opened doors through an introduction. But Neil failed to ask for one. In fact, Neil had hoped that after sharing his background with the SVP, the SVP would propose ways forward—which she didn't do.

Had Neil just wasted a fantastic opportunity?

When it comes to networking, most of us are like Neil. We spend too much time on how to secure a meeting—and not nearly enough time on *what we really want to get out of it*. We assume once we have a networking conversation, a good outcome will take care of itself. We're just not networking effectively.

Let's be honest. Networking with powerful and influential people can quickly open doors and [accelerate our careers](#). Their recommendations can send our resumes straight to a decision maker or the top of the pile. Their introductions to the right people can get us a foot in the door to create opportunities that distinguish us from others. And their advice and insights can help us identify more efficient routes to the career growth we seek.

The SVP could have done any of these things to help Neil. But like most

THE SVP COULD HAVE DONE ANY OF THOSE THINGS TO HELP NEIL. BUT LIKE MOST powerful people, the SVP was extremely busy. She was unlikely to have time to meet Neil again, let alone spend more time thinking how to advance Neil's career.



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It was Neil's job to be clear on what he wanted and make it easy for the SVP to help him. Was there a job opening in the company that Neil sought? Was there another executive that Neil could help through a short project? Was Neil better off taking an entirely different strategy to changing industries?

So we need to be clear. Even when we are clear about what we want from other people, most of us *don't even ask*. We fear rejection, even though [research](#) shows we underestimate by as much as 50% the likelihood that others will say yes to our requests.

Neil should have taken fuller advantage of his networking

conversation.

How to Network Like a Pro

Like a star gymnast, if you want to get gold, you have to master how to stick your landing. Before your next networking conversation, follow these four steps to network effectively:

- 1. Write down your goal.** Writing down your goal makes it easy to structure the beginning and the end of your conversation. For instance, Neil wanted to get out of analytics and land a new role in a commercial function, ideally in the SVP's company. So the meeting with the SVP would ideally lead to an interview or project with the marketing director. That made it important to focus the discussion around marketing, specifically how Neil's experience and background in analytics could be beneficial in a commercial role.
- 2. Plan the structure of your meeting and anticipate what obstacles might arise.** With the end in mind, plan how to open and structure the discussion, what to prepare in advance, and what issues the other person may raise. Did the SVP or the company have a prior opinion, in an article or speech, that would indicate what skills they saw as important in their marketing managers? What relevant topics and questions would show that Neil was taking full advantage of the meeting? What issues might the SVP raise on why Neil was not qualified—and how would Neil handle those?

3. **Prepare your closing questions.** Prepare several **closing questions**, which gives flexibility if the conversation leads in unexpected or interesting directions. Hoping the conversation will end well is not a strategy. If the conversation went well, then Neil would ask for an introduction to the hiring manager if the SVP did not offer one. If it was clear the SVP was not convinced about Neil's skills, then Neil would seek advice or propose ways he could prove his capabilities. For example:

- Direct Ask: *"Could you help me with an introduction to Joe, the marketing director?"*
- Seek Advice: *"Given our discussion and your experience, what do you advise as the best way to position my skills and approach the marketing director?"*
- Propose an Idea: *"I had been told that proposing a consulting project would be most useful. Would that be a good strategy as I seek to shift roles?"*

4. **Practice.** Practice in front a mirror, record yourself, or practice live with a friend. Take your notes or a checklist to your conversation. Writing down a clear goal helps you structure the conversation and prepare for obstacles that may arise. Asking becomes more natural over time, but even seasoned sales representatives and networkers carefully plan and rehearse, especially when the stakes are high. Neil had worked too hard to secure the SVP's time to leave the outcome to chance. Gymnasts know the landing is critical, so they spend hours practicing it.

You have done the hard work securing your networking meeting

you have done the hard work securing your networking meeting. There's no one way to perfectly end every conversation, but failing to plan is a plan to fail. Spend more time on how you want the meeting to end, and you'll get more of what you want.

**All names and identifying details have been changed*

More from Michael C. Wenderoth

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