Strategies in Social Networking:
Leveraging Your Personal & Professional Connections

By Steve Booze, Chief Operating Officer
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Introduction

Before Facebook or Twitter or even MySpace, the concept of social networking had nothing to do with online profiles. A social network was just that — a group of connections who we spend time with socially. Sometimes those networks intersect, sometimes they don’t. And not much thought generally goes into creating them.

But anymore, formulating a structured social networking plan and process is vital to a person’s professional success. If you’re not out there, you’re liable to be viewed as not serious about your career.

Now, I’m not suggesting that you start collecting people for the sole purpose of using them for your personal gain. Your network shouldn’t be crowded with people in high places whom you hate, but who can “hook you up.”

Rather, you should be filling it with people who are genuinely willing to lend you a hand or even take a risk for you.¹

And it goes without saying that you should be willing to do the same for those in your network.
4 Musts of Effective Networking

In his book *Creating Value with Knowledge*, Rob Cross describes the four relational qualities of an effective social network within a business:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Knowing what another person knows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Being able to connect with the individual in a timely manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>How willing the individual is to help solve the problem, rather than just giving opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>There should be no fear of negative consequences to engaging in the relationship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So, I took a gander at my own personal social network (Figure 1) to see how it measured up in terms of the four qualities. After a close look, it was pretty clear that I had not assembled my social network using any sort of logical strategy.

![Diagram showing a haphazard social network](image)

**Figure 1**
Other than gathering a lot of connections through LinkedIn (the vast majority with whom I have very little, if any, actual relationship), my core network still comprises a small group. Most are people I know from college or work.

As a result, in the areas of Access and Safety (see chart on page 4), I have been extremely fortunate: The individuals in my network always make themselves available to me, and there is never a fear of exposing myself and feeling vulnerable.

However, my network falls short in the areas of Knowledge and Engagement. Because my core trusted social network is so small, their areas of expertise are somewhat similar to my own, which limits their ability to provide me with a high level of career guidance.

On the other hand, it is not uncommon for one of them to put me in contact with another individual in their network when I’m looking for information they can’t directly provide. In this way, the dynamics of accessibility have changed.

Now, if my need is relatively large, I don't expect anyone to spend a considerable amount of time diving in and helping me to solve my problem. In these instances, we're all quick to provide our insights and then continue about our activities.

This isn't an indictment of the relationships; it's just the way it goes. We all have competing demands for our time. And requests from friends don't rank as high on the priority list as requests from our families or our employers.
Fortunately, in my professional network, the experience is completely different.

Here, I have taken much more time to cultivate the relationships. As is often the case in a work environment, I am in close proximity of others I may never have met under other circumstances, and I make more of an effort to maintain a relationship where I might otherwise have chosen not to.

Professional networking is generally where people step the furthest outside their comfort zones. The Penn State Alumni Association published an article with the observation that “networking affords you the opportunity to interact with people outside of your regular social circle. People are an important source of knowledge — not just about open positions, but also about careers, companies, entire industries, geographic areas, skills needed for a particular position, and more.”

Mr. Booze frequently speaks before networking groups of his professional colleagues.
Internal Networks & Problem Response

There’s another kind of professional network: the one we live within, day in and day out. It’s created for us by our employer, so we aren’t picking and choosing whom to add to it. This network is largely assigned to us. Or, we’re assigned to it.

In the article “A Practical Guide to Social Networking,” author Rob Cross and his colleagues delved into the mechanics of the workplace network.

Cross’s group assessed more than 60 organizational networks over a broad spectrum of industries, and observed three basic archetypes of collaboration that emerge as employees work together to solve problems:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archetype</th>
<th>Conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customized Response</td>
<td>Emerges in settings where both the problems and solutions are vague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modular Response</td>
<td>Emerges in settings where components of problems and solutions are known, but the combination or sequence is not known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine Response</td>
<td>Emerges in settings where work is standardized and problems and their solutions are well defined and predictable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the software development organization where I work, we fall nicely into the Modular Response category. We can easily identify who needs to work on the solution, but the solution itself is rarely immediately obvious. As such, when presented with a challenge or an opportunity, experts from the involved departments gather and work together to devise a solution.
Additionally, the hierarchy is such that our thought leaders have just as much — if not more — clout as the "people" leaders. This type of structure allows for more productive interaction and collaboration with people across the entire organization.

At first blush, it would seem that our internal network should be evenly distributed. However, after sketching out an informal diagram of our company’s social network (Figure 2), I realized this is not the case.

This exercise provided me both insight and concern.

In many organizations, there is a natural connection between leadership and HR. I believe this relationship is stronger at my company than at most.

Due to poor communication between departments — as well as a lack of focus on developing our managers — our HR manager has forged a much tighter relationship with each department head. She's often put in the role of fielding questions and providing guidance about situations that really should be addressed by a functional manager. She effectively ends up performing the role of knowledge broker for the activities that happen within each department.

The author’s Human Resources manager has forged a tight relationship with each department head, effectively acting as the company’s knowledge broker.
Looking at Figure 2, you’ll notice that my direct manager and I are on the periphery of the network. This type of arrangement isn’t unusual, according to Cross: “As people move higher within an organization, their work begins to entail more administrative tasks, [making] them both less accessible and less knowledgeable about the day-to-day work of their subordinates.”

Still, this separation from the network definitely hinders a manager’s ability to make effective business decisions.
Planning Your Networking Strategy

In reviewing the diagrams and combining them with what I've learned, I've come to this conclusion: In order to continue to be successful, my personal network needs to expand to include many more people from my professional network. By making a concerted effort to combine the two, I will not only enhance my knowledge and reach, but just as importantly, I'll have access to a richer and deeper group of individuals that both networks can leverage. This, in turn, will increase my value as a connector and allow me to better serve my network (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

In this diagram, you can see how I serve as a hub for both networks.
To pull off this “network mind-meld,” I’ll first align the roles and responsibilities of the two groups, identifying the value in each potential connection, and then making formal introductions accordingly. I also plan to use a completely separate online networking tool to house these “close connections.” LinkedIn and ZoomInfo will remain my public networking tools, but this new platform will be created to be exclusive, rather than inclusive.

Next, I need to work with our CEO to address the heavy internal reliance upon our HR manager to serve as a network hub. Besides it being a lost opportunity for our managers to grow in their roles, we should try to mitigate risks as part of succession planning.

After all, most professionals aren't content to stay in the same role forever, so we should have a plan for how our leaders will grow up and out of their current roles, and into ones that will propel their success.

By making the necessary changes, we can relieve some of the unofficial responsibility from our HR manager’s duties by properly training the current leadership team as well as resolving to hire resources with strong management and leadership skills. Furthermore, our HR manager will be encouraged to continue to redistribute any managerial questions to the appropriate manager or executive.

“Even if your interactions with someone are limited, you can maximize that limited time by focusing on meaningful rather than more superficial exchanges. . . .”

— Juliana Breines
Conclusion

In a knowledge society, in addition to technical skills and access to information, it is increasingly important for people to have diversified and supportive social connections. And not all of these connections need to be long-standing relationships. As Juliana Breines, a Ph.D. in Social and Personality Psychology from the University of California, Berkeley, explains, “Even if your interactions with someone are limited, you can maximize that limited time by focusing on meaningful rather than more superficial exchanges — and by offering up your own ideas and resources rather than just considering what you have to gain. People are more likely to want to go to bat for you if they feel valued by you and see the relationship as mutually beneficial.”

So, how does your network look? (And I don't mean the number of Twitter followers or Facebook friends you have.) Have you taken a close look at the depth and breadth of the experience of your connections? Have you assessed how you can provide assistance to others, and thought about how you could leverage the experience and knowledge of those in your circle? If not, it's worth examining your social network — as the saying goes, “Show me your friends, and I'll show you your future.”

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About Steve Booze

Steve Booze joined AppointmentPlus in 2011 as CIO, and assumed the role of COO in 2013. A visionary strategist and gifted leader, Steve excels at building relationships with employees and customers. And with a BS in Quantitative History, if Steve spies something on our digital horizon, you can probably put money on it.

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AppointmentPlus scheduling software is a configurable, rules-based, pure SaaS product. Our software — combined with our deep product integration knowledge, customer experience focus, and amazing ability to both analyze synergies and synergize analogies — has made us the vendor of choice for many Fortune 500 companies.

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References


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