

## Trainers Tip: Harness the power of your network

*As part of our March theme, 'out of the office', Judith Perle extols the virtues of networking, not least for all you freelance trainers who are out and about.*

Academics aren't known for agreeing with each other. Yet researchers from top institutions around the world agree on at least one thing: building a strong network is one of the keys to success. And they make their point clearly and forcefully. In an article published by the MIT Sloan School of Management, Rob Cross and his colleagues state:

"What really distinguishes high performers from the rest of the pack is their ability to maintain and leverage personal networks. The most effective [high performers] create and tap large, diversified networks that are rich in experience and span all organisational boundaries." [1]

Professor Herminia Ibarra (an expert on leadership and professional development at INSEAD business school) and Mark Hunter say in the prestigious Harvard Business Review:

"We have seen over and over again that people who work at networking can learn not only how to do it well but also how to enjoy it. And they tend to be more successful in their careers." [2]

This academic consensus begs the question: Why? Put simply, the answer might run something like this: 'Networking is so important because it can help us in almost every single aspect of our professional (and most probably personal) lives.'



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We've spent the past decade helping people find ways of networking more effectively and, crucially, getting them to feel more comfortable doing so. In that time we've come across abundant research, and masses of case studies to back this up. Here's just one of the many anecdotes we have collected over the years.

### **Over the garden fence**

David Ogilvy, the famous advertising guru, is reputed to have said: "50% of all ads work. I just wish I knew which 50%." The same is true of networking. One contact, one event may prove pretty fruitless; the next unexpectedly interesting and useful.

So, I accepted an invitation to a formal networking dinner with some misgivings – it was going to be a time-consuming evening, and the format wasn't conducive to meeting a lot of people. After all too brief pre-dinner drinks, I found myself seated at a large square table, only able to chat comfortably

to my two immediate neighbours. The person on my right was hard work, and I eventually gave up my attempt to create rapport. Instead I turned to my left, and there I struck gold.

Mike was the CEO of a relatively young telecoms start up, but had spent most of his working life rising up the ranks of British Telecom. I myself have made a significant career change in my life, and we commiserated on the hurdles that litter the path. Mike's impressive CV made it relatively easy for him to get interviews, he said, but the obstruction always came at the last fence – employers were simply unwilling to give him a chance to do something new, to prove that he could move successfully from a corporate environment to a smaller and altogether more flexible outfit, even in the same industry sector.

Mike continued: "You won't believe how I eventually got my break! My father-in-law, who lectures in ancient Greek at Cambridge University, happened to be chatting to his neighbour, literally 'over the garden fence', and mentioned his son-in-law's career issues. This guy listened attentively, and then said quietly: I happen to run an incubator. 'Tell Mike to call me, and I'll see if I can help out'".

That's exactly what Mike did, of course, and the end result was the opportunity to head the start-up which Mike was running when I met him.

I chose this case study for several couple of reasons. First of all, it provides more evidence (if more evidence were needed) that you can never, ever know who knows whom. Networks really are like icebergs – most connections are hidden beneath the surface, and ignoring them is potentially dangerous. As Mike said: I get on perfectly well with my father-in-law, but we don't have an enormous amount in common and never in a million years would I have expected to get my big break with his help.

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Secondly, that particular networking event taught me very firmly that 'you get out what you put in'. I wasn't keen on going to the dinner – but I pushed myself on the basis that I really ought to practice what I preach, and get out and about and meet new people. And on this occasion I was rewarded with an anecdote which I have told at almost every workshop or masterclass I have ever run.

This story is also a nice example of how valuable chance encounters (over the garden fence, at a networking event, round the water cooler) can be. I'm not saying, by any stretch of the imagination, that each and every conversation you have will bring huge benefits in its wake – but I am saying that if you aren't willing (or able) to have those conversations, you're going to miss out on lots of opportunities.

Networking alone won't change your life. But active networking will certainly go a long way to nudging things in the right direction.

*Judith Perle is a co-founder of [Management Advantage](#), and leads workshops, seminars and masterclasses in networking skills. She is also co-author (with Tony Newton) of [The Network Effect](#). Written as an extension of their interactive workshops, the book walks you through everything you need to know about connecting with other people. It's available [direct from the website](#) and from [Amazon](#)*

*[1] Rob Cross, Thomas Davenport and Susan Cantrell, "The Social Side Of Performance", MIT Sloan Management Review, Fall 2003, Vol 45, Issue 1*

*[2] Herminia Ibarra and Mark Hunter, "How Leaders Create And Use Networks", Harvard Business Review, January 2007*