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Shift your mindset

The 2012 movie *Disconnect* features three different groups of characters, their search for connection and their dependence on technology. A young married couple who recently lost a baby have their identities stolen and exposed online. Two teenagers use Facebook to cyber-bully a lonely and unpopular classmate whose hardworking lawyer father is so hardwired to his phone that he can't find the time to communicate with his family. An ambitious TV reporter uncovers a story about an 18-year-old webcam porn performer that could make her career—then she falls in love with him.

These disparate stories become increasingly entangled and connected as the film progresses. By the end (spoiler alert!), they all come to realise that what is most important in life is the love they share with those closest to them, from whom they have become estranged and disconnected.

Connecting. Networking. Sounds simple, maybe too simple. These are not new concepts. Rather, connecting and networking have been the cornerstones of good business since business began.

As explored in the movie *Disconnect*, the internet has opened up a whole new world of content, connections and networking

possibilities. The explosion of digital and social media has fundamentally changed the way we function, communicate and do business both online and offline.

Yet the technology that was supposed to connect us and bring us closer together actually seems to be having the reverse effect.

Something about how we are networking right now just isn't working.

When I first started networking back in the eighties, 22 years old and fresh out of university, the hardest part was knowing where to go for help and support. In those early days of my career, networking was mostly about hanging out with your crew from work at a nearby bar. If you were lucky enough to be invited to a company or industry function, you'd pull on your power suit of confidence and off you'd go armed with a wallet full of business cards and a 30-second elevator pitch.

The goal was to swap cards and chat with as many people as possible. This was relatively easy, albeit a little nerve-racking, though the cheap wine helped. The follow-up involved a phone call, or maybe a handwritten 'nice to meet you' note sent by snail mail, with the business card you'd just collected filed in your plump Rolodex or a plastic sleeve in a Filofax.

These days we are bombarded by multiple networking groups, industry-specific events and meet-ups through friends and colleagues or via LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and assorted other channels. Then there's speed networking (designed along the lines of speed dating), an event format in which you have a brief set time span to strike up a 'connection' before you have to move on to the next person.

But are we really connecting here?

#Connecting or #disconnecting?

American psychiatrist Edward Hallowell writes,

Never in human history have our brains had to work with so much information as they do today... We have a generation of

people who are so busy processing the information received from all directions that they are losing the ability to think and feel.

The explosion of social media has turned the world of face-to-face interactions upside down, opening up previously unimagined opportunities and ways of connecting with our friends, peers, existing and future clients, and complete strangers worldwide — all at the touch of a button. We are more connected than ever before through our smartphone, the internet, instant messaging and social media.

According to statsita.com, ‘The power of social networking is such that the number of worldwide users is expected to reach some 2.95 billion by 2020, around a third of the Earth’s entire population.’ New social networking sites are popping up every minute. LinkedIn is growing at the rate of two new members per second.

With the increase in ‘connection’, however, has come a parallel increase in ‘disconnection’.

In her book *Alone Together*, social psychologist Sherry Turkle argues that our relentless connection to the digital world is actually driving isolation. On the whole, she says, we are now ‘more lonely and distant from one another ... This is not only changing the way we interact online, it’s straining our personal relationships, as well.’

A 2013 study by Hanna Krasnova and a group of researchers from two German universities¹ examined the impact of envy on Facebook. The study concluded that one in three people felt worse after visiting Facebook. ‘Lurkers’ who spent time looking at everyone else’s content, while not posting any of their own, felt especially dissatisfied. This behaviour led to feelings of loneliness, frustration and anger.

These feelings are encapsulated in the label FOMO, or Fear of Missing Out, which is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as ‘anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on social media’.

Social media encourages one-way communication. Status updates and shout-outs, overloading and oversharing of personal

information and hashtags — #kidspam, #foodenvy, #bestdayever, #grateful, #inspired — make us look 'good' but feel 'bad', and add very little of actual value to our lives.

In reality, our actual conversations tend to be brief, fleeting and superficial. A quick scan of any café, restaurant, bus, train or footpath will suggest we're more interested in what is happening on our screens than in the people next to us — even our children, who are now babysat with Peppa Pig on the iPad.

Sure, we're connected, but increasingly to the digital world rather than to the real world and each other. Networking, on the other hand, relies on two-way communication: the mutual exchange of information and value.

So if we're feeling stressed out with all this frivolous one-way online communication, how has this affected the way we view and do networking?

The 'work' in network

So many of us avoid *networking* because we see it as exactly that — hard work. We've put the *work* back into networking and made it all too difficult and exhausting. The problem is that often the events we choose to attend have little relevance or value for us. For most of us, when we do network, we network within the narrow orbit of our immediate circle, tapping into like-minded circles of sympathetic people. This is fine as far as it goes, but it has limitations over time. By minimising difference of opinion and experience, it breeds laziness, stifles growth and limits potential.

Having spoken and worked with many people over the years I have studied the subject, I have found there are four key pain points we report feeling when it comes to networking. These are:

1. overwhelmed
2. overcomplicated
3. overstretched
4. over it!

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

1. Overwhelmed

Where do we begin? With all the online and offline options available to us, many of us feel overwhelmed by choice, with no idea where to start when it comes to building a network. Face-to-face engagement puts pressure on us to be constantly interesting and engaging; computers remove much of that pressure, so it's no wonder people opt to hide behind their smartphones and their like buttons. But how do we talk about ourselves or ask for help? And why would anyone care?

2. Overcomplicated

Which tools and applications should I use? Which social media networks should I be on—and should I join all, one or just some of them? How do I manage them? Given time constraints, how do I keep in touch with an ever-growing network? Which face-to-face events should I attend? How often do I need to ‘network’?

These are just some of the many questions you face when it comes to the Rubik's cube of networking sites, events and groups.

Add to this the pressures of multitasking, having to think on your feet, constantly switching focus, jumping from one group of people to the next while trying to remember what actions you should take ... Are you confused yet?

3. Overstretched

We struggle with prioritising the tasks on our to-do list, let alone deciding on who to call or get a cuppa with, or which networking event to attend. The follow-up conversations are often rushed and superficial, falling back on small talk and an obsessive fixation on the weather (or that could be the English in me). Words and messages are communicated through acronyms—LOL, FYI and OMG and the like, with more arcane expressions such as IRL, TBH and DFTBA (don't forget to be awesome) on the rise.

Every day we are pulled and stretched in hundreds of directions, challenged to be truly 'present' while maximising productivity despite the growing demands on our time and energy. Most of us

report feeling drained, exhausted and overstretched much of the time. Throw networking into the mix, and many of us will say, 'I know I should, but I'll do it another day.'

4. Over it!

When it comes to networking, we are quite simply *over it*. We know we should network because everyone around us is telling us so, but where is the real evidence of the return? *Why should I network? Is it really necessary?* Most of us these days would rather be doing something else.

Why bother?

If we're feeling overwhelmed, confused, overstretched and over it, why on earth would we still bother networking?

It's simple really.

You can't get anywhere in life on your own.

Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, names Larry Summers, from the US Treasury Department and the World Bank, as her first and most important mentor. Fashion designer Yves St Laurent declares that Christian Dior 'taught me the basis of my art ... I never forgot the years I spent at his side'. Facebook gladiator Mark Zuckerberg learned about business and management practices from regular meetings with Apple founder Steve Jobs. Philanthropist and businessman Michael Bloomberg learned teamwork and ethics from William R. Saloman, managing partner of an investment bank where Bloomberg first worked.

A strong, connected and mutually beneficial network provides you with a series of stepping stones to success. The intentional support of another, with whom you collaborate and share what you know and who you know, pushes you forward in life.

The active and mutual support of others helps to:

- boost confidence
- achieve clear goals

- open doors to opportunity
- create business leads
- support decision making
- pave the path to success.

Countless articles and books have been written about the importance of networking. In his book *Highly Effective Networking*, Orville Pearson writes, 'When the economy is good networking is important. In tough times or tough job markets, networking is essential.'

It is imperative today to join forces with others, utilise your collective skills and experience, add new connections and insights, and communicate the support you need to step into your future. The beauty, as *Never Eat Alone* author Keith Ferrazzi puts it, is that 'by giving your time and expertise and sharing them freely, the pie gets bigger for everyone'.

One is a lonely number

It is widely assumed that entrepreneurs operate alone, overcoming all challenges and bringing their ideas to market out of sheer individual drive and personality. This could not be further from the truth! Entrepreneurs understand that it is essential to have a core network around them to maximise the chances of productive ideas coming to fruition.

Dame Anita Roddick, founder of cosmetics giant The Body Shop, once said: 'We entrepreneurs are loners, vagabonds, troublemakers. Success is simply a matter of finding and surrounding ourselves with those open-minded and clever souls who can take our insanity and put it to good use.'

Even Steve Jobs, who was widely recognised as a loner, is said to have shared with his biographer Walter Isaacson, 'Creativity comes from spontaneous meetings, from random discussions. You run into someone, you ask what they are doing, you say WOW and soon you're cooking up all sorts of ideas.'

A solid network of key players is like an invisible protective shield. It's often not the smartest person in the room who achieves success in life, but the one with the right networks and contacts.

Rita Pierson spent more than 40 years in and around the classroom. In her TED talk 'Every Kid Needs a Champion', she describes teaching classes that were so academically deficient it would reduce her to tears. One year she lied and told her students, 'You were chosen to be in my class because I am the best teacher and you are the best students, they put us together so we could show everybody else how to do it.' In a class test of 20 questions, one child got 18 questions wrong, so she gave him a +2 and a smiley face. When he asked if he had failed Rita responded, 'Yes ... but you are on a roll, you got two right.'

This encouragement and support is exactly what gets you to where you want to go in life. And it simply cannot be done on your own.

Rework your network

Social media thought leader Mari Smith believes, 'Strategic, professional networking is one of the most powerful methods of growing your business in today's world.'

The key word here is *strategic*.

In 'Managing Yourself, A Smarter Way to Network' (*Harvard Business Review*, July 2011), Rob Cross and Robert J. Thomas found:

The executives who consistently rank in the top 20% of their companies in both performance and well-being have diverse but select networks... made up of high-quality relationships with people who come from several different spheres and from up and down the corporate hierarchy.

We must build strategic connections around us, assembling a select group of people who open us to quality thinking and new perspectives.

Building a network that works is both an art and a science. It is an art in that it requires basic human skills in communication,

connection, authenticity, and the ability to be ‘in the present’ and engaged with people and conversation.

It is a science in that building your network strategically requires an ongoing analysis and audit of your network, and a sustained curiosity around whether you’re leveraging your network in the best way you can. It’s about seeing the lines that connect people and ideas and create opportunity.

This means stripping away all the rubbish, reworking the way we network and connecting to others on a personal level with authenticity, meaning and value. It’s time to start connecting with the right people in the right way, to learn how to build quality relationships.

You need to move from how many people you know to who are the right people to know.

Surround yourself with the right people, people who will guide and mentor you and cheer you on, people who will help shape the person you eventually become. It’s up to you to choose your network wisely.

Take back control

Building a more valuable network means taking back ownership and control of your network and approaching your actions and connections with strategic deliberation.

When you align yourself with thinkers and doers who may have achieved what you dream of achieving or who simply ride shotgun alongside you, you’ll be pushed to take the right actions and be inspired to move in the right direction towards your goals. This group of super-powers will build your success, boost your positive mojo and keep you in a place of constant growth.

Spend time with ‘cup half empty’ thinkers and you’ll feel low and de-energised. Spend time with individuals who dream big and see the cup not just as half full but as overflowing, and you’ll believe anything is possible.

You have to take ownership of your own network and to assess it continuously so it continues to evolve.

It's not about being in touch with as many people as possible; it's about finding the right people and the right relationships, as we'll explore in the next chapter.

If you want to fast-track your success, you need to take responsibility for your life, own the choices you make and spend time with those with a similarly positive attitude. Then you'll become a more proactive, positive individual with the ability to shape your own future.

Networking still a number one skill

Having a network has helped tremendously in shaping my career in multiple ways.

First, every career opportunity I have been given has come through my network. Second, my core network provides access to people with significant experience and influence, individuals who have been there and done that, and who are willing to share their ideas and thinking with me, allowing me to draw from their experience and insights.

In the early days, I didn't get it right. Looking back, there was a point when I realised that my network consisted only of people I worked with—it was very one-dimensional.

Now I am one of the most recognised finance professionals in Sydney finance circles, I have been asked to speak at numerous events and the connections have absolutely expanded my thinking and enabled me to perform even better in my current role.

I now have access to a broad and diverse range of individuals doing different things within the finance spectrum. It puts me in a unique position to understand what's going on in the industry at a broader level and also allows me to tap into the experience, expertise and insights of all these individuals.

Building a network that worked for me was critical—in fact, I think it has been a game changer.

Chax Poduri, senior finance executive, Hewlett Packard Enterprise
