

The Art of Networking: Your Most Underrated Career Asset

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Throughout my career as an HR professional, one truth has proven itself time and again: networking is not just a buzzword — it is one of the most powerful tools available to any professional. Whether you are looking to accelerate your career, solve a complex business challenge, or simply navigate the everyday dynamics of corporate life, the relationships you build and nurture will shape your journey more than almost anything else.

And yet, especially here in Europe, many of us shy away from it. Networking feels uncomfortable. It feels transactional, even unfair — as though getting ahead through connections is somehow bypassing the meritocracy we believe in. I understand that feeling. But I would like to challenge it. Because when done right, networking is not about gaming the system. It is about being genuinely curious about people, generous with your time, and intentional about the relationships you invest in.

Let's take a step back and explore what networking truly means — and how to do it well.



What Exactly Is Networking?

Networking is fundamentally different from the day-to-day communication we engage in at work. It is intentional, systematic, and forward-looking. At its core, networking is about searching for and creating new connections — going beyond the familiar faces in your immediate team or department.

True networkers are genuinely interested in people. They find real joy in learning about others. Networking means influencing and being influenced — exchanging ideas, perspectives, and opportunities in ways that benefit everyone involved. Most importantly, it is about consciously developing and maintaining relationships over time, not just collecting business cards at a conference.

The Rules of Effective Networking

Like any professional skill, networking comes with its own set of principles. First and foremost: invest time and energy to go beyond your existing circle. It is easy to stay within the comfort zone of people you already know. Growth, however, happens at the edges.

Actively look for opportunities to meet people from other parts of your organisation, your industry, or your broader ecosystem. Maintain, cultivate, and grow your network continuously and systematically — not just when you need something. Use your network as a resource for knowledge, influence, and connection. And as you build it, never lose sight of your personal brand: be deliberate about how you communicate your value and what you stand for.

How to Go About It: A Practical Process

Effective networking is not accidental. There is a clear process behind it, built on five key steps: have a strategy, focus, connect, stay in touch, and give and take.

1. Have a Strategy

Start by asking yourself: what information, contacts, or assistance do I currently need? Set a clear objective for how many new people you want to engage with over a given period. At the same time, remain open to serendipity — some of the most valuable connections come from unexpected conversations.

2. Focus

Every person you meet deserves your full respect and attention. Seminars, workshops, and drinks receptions are good sources for networking — arrive early, strike up conversations with organisers or speakers, and keep an eye out for approachable individuals. A crucial rule: get to know the person first before diving into business. Bring up a topic you are genuinely passionate about — it reveals your personality and makes the interaction memorable. Listen more than you speak, and always have your elevator speech ready when someone asks, “So, what do you do?” Equally important: ask how you can help them with their current projects.

3. Connect

After an initial encounter, build on it. Reach out to your new acquaintance, suggest a coffee or a lunch. The transition from “nice to meet you” to a real professional relationship requires a conscious follow-up step — take that step.

4. Stay in Touch

Maintaining a relationship requires deliberate effort. Forward an article or link that might interest them. Invite them to events you are attending. Wish them a happy birthday. As a general rule, aim to make contact at least four times a year — not to ask for anything, simply to keep the relationship warm and alive.

5. Give and Take — but Give First

The golden rule of networking: give more than you expect to receive. Ask yourself who you could introduce this person to. Let them know you welcome referrals. Have a clear, confident answer prepared for when someone asks, “How can I help you?” And always keep people updated if they have gone out of their way to recommend you to someone else — closing the loop shows respect and builds trust.

A Special Note for Women

Women continue to face structural challenges in organisations — limited access to development opportunities, invisible gatekeepers, and networks that were historically built without them in mind. This makes intentional networking even more critical for women. A strong network can provide visibility, sponsorship, and the kind of support that helps navigate these challenges effectively.

My advice: make networking a genuine priority. And to make it feel less like work, combine it with your interests and hobbies. Join a professional group around something you love. Attend events in spaces where you feel energised. The best networking rarely feels like networking at all.

Your Challenge for This Week

Here is something actionable I want to leave you with: think of two people who are currently outside your professional network but who should be in it. Maybe it is a former colleague, someone you admire from afar, or a fellow MBA alumnus you have fallen out of touch with. Reach out to them this week. A single message can be the start of a relationship that changes the trajectory of your career.

Networking is not about being the most extroverted person in the room. It is about being intentional, generous, and consistent. Start today.

About the Author

Tali Zimmerman-Baer is a senior HR professional with 20+ years of experience across various HR functions, including HR Business Partner, Internal Mobility, Campus Relations and DE&I - in companies like GE, Credit Suisse/UBS, and ETH Zurich (Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich). She is passionate about creating sustainable impact by supporting employee development, helping people to build connections and fostering inclusive work environments.

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