

The Minority MBA's Guide to Networking

If the prospect of career networking fills you with dread, don't panic. Real networking—the art of building mutually beneficial relationships before you need them—is a lot easier than you think.

by Dahna M. Chandler

Career networking is a professional skill as vital to upwardly mobile MBAs as understanding business strategy. Just as you learned to analyze case studies, you can learn to network effectively. In fact, for minority MBAs, it might be the most important career-building skill you'll ever learn. Among the many things you can accomplish through networks are building support, getting feedback, developing skills, finding mentors and establishing your professional value among those who will determine your success in your organization.

Yet, say the word “networking” to some people and their stomachs knot up and their palms sweat as thoughts of uncomfortable interactions and images of neediness and desperation surface. For all too many MBAs, networking means going to those marathon professional events where score is kept by the number of business cards handed out and the winners meet “the right” people. Fraught with personal insecurities, some people freeze in these situations, fearful of what may come out of their mouths. With memories of past failures choking them, they conclude, “I’m no good at networking.”

Many of these networking-challenged individuals spend long hours working, having limited interactions with colleagues yet hoping excellent job performance will be enough to earn them those high-profile projects and mentoring relationships that lead to promotions, raises, bonuses and that coveted corner office. Occasionally they'll make attempts at networking because they believe it's important to “be seen” participating a few times a year in high-visibility business gatherings and volunteer activities that make them look effective to their superiors.

Yet, they still end up wondering why they aren't making those important but seemingly elusive connections to senior managers that will help them move up the career ladder. They watch helplessly and, often, resentfully as more networking-adept colleagues—whom they perceive to be “brownnosers”—enjoy stratospheric career success while their own careers stagnate.

The problem with this approach to networking is that it is based on a fundamental misconception: that networking means periodic participation in a series of hit or miss activities that enhance career opportunities. But in reality, says Dan Williams, founder of Washington, D.C.'s largest networking organization, The Networking Community, “Professional networking is not an event, it's a process. It's a skill to be learned and mastered—the ultimate application of the marketing skills you learn in business [school].”

Most master networkers like Williams agree: Networking is about patiently building relationships over time, *before* you need them, not just reaching out to people when you need a job or a favor. Real networking relationships are reciprocal, Williams emphasizes: “They're about exchanging information and trying to satisfy mutual needs.”

Moreover, he continues, “Networking strategy isn’t ‘one size fits all’ but should be customized to the individual’s needs.” Williams, who leads monthly workshops on effective networking skills, says it’s imperative to learn how to build vital career relationships. And statistics bear him out.

Networking by the Numbers

Though quality counts more than quantity in networking, the numbers show how critical networking relationships can be to professional success. Consider these statistics related to networking for a job search, the most common reason professionals network:

- An April 2001 study by the Society for Human Resource Management and Career-Journal showed that 95% of job seekers and HR professionals relied on networking to find jobs and candidates, respectively. The same study found that HR professionals used employee referrals, another form of networking, 91% of the time in hiring new candidates.
- In a 1999 career transition study done by human resources consulting firm Drake Beam Morin, 64% of the almost 7,500 people surveyed said they found their new jobs through networking.
- In *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Three Years Later*, a 2002 report by Catalyst, 49% of women of color cited networking as an important success factor.

Diane Darling, author of *The Networking Survival Guide: Get the Success You Want by Tapping Into the People You Know*, says that her data shows the following percentages to be an accurate reflection of how important establishing career-building relationships—as opposed to single activity networking events—can be to getting a job:

Tactic	% Effectiveness
Cold calling (phone call, blind email)	10%
Direct referral (using someone’s name)	15%
Introduction by referral (via email, phone or face-to-face)	50%
Introduction plus meeting or conference call (face-to-face ideal)	80%

As the last statistic proves, direct connection through a member of your network to a key person in an organization for which you’d like to work increases the odds of your landing a position in that company exponentially. “Because networking is something you do from your first conversation in the morning to your last before going to sleep at night, you can parlay these tactics into other areas of professional interaction,” adds Darling, who has conducted networking seminars for MBAs at Harvard Business School, Sloan School of Management and elsewhere. “These statistics translate to your chances of having problems solved, recruiting the right person for a position and closing a deal.”

Shelia Gray, vice president of external affairs for the National Association of African Americans in Human Resources, agrees. “I’m an example of successful networking,” declares Gray, who has obtained all of her positions through networking. Of her experience, she explains, “Everyone tries to be employer of choice but they don’t tell you about their corporate culture. So networking has also prevented me from taking bad jobs.”

William Ortiz, president of the multicultural marketing communications agency GlobalWorks Group’s HispanicWorks division, points out that “networking sometimes helps you leapfrog the job search process. It’s been critical in my career, since I got three or four positions through someone I know.”

Because, as Darling’s statistics also suggest, networking happens in a variety of ways, it’s important to learn how to maximize them all. Netiquette is as important as phone conversation skills. Anything you use to communicate who you are—not just your business cards and resume but also your business letters, voicemail (cell and office) and “thank you” notes (the handwritten kind is better than email)—is a critical tool for networking success.

Who Knows You?

A networking plan is important for meeting people helpful to your professional growth. But contrary to a popular networking myth, says George Fraser, author of *Success Runs in Our*



Race: The Complete Guide to Effective Networking in the African-American Community, “It’s not who you know, but who knows *you* and *what* they know *about you* that’s most important in networking.”

Moreover, Darling emphasizes, “The strongest networks are those built on quality, not quantity, in which the network relationships are depth-based, not shallow. How well someone knows you determines how they present you to others.”

Adds Gray, “There are people you may not like but you may need them later in your career, so don’t underestimate the importance of any relationship, good or bad.”

Minority MBAs should begin by building their networks among peers and professors in business school, since you can then tap that network throughout your professional life. These contacts can become your personal public relations network, often identifying opportunities that suit you before you would find them on your own.

Further, networking experts agree that being identified by mentors requires networking mastery to build relationships with those who see value in helping you succeed. “Networking can lead to mentoring relationships because effective mentorships are established on an informal basis, and the best mentorships arise from long-term relationships between individuals who know each other well,” says José Berrios, vice president of human resources and diversity for Gannett Co. in McLean, Virginia.

Similarly, in their book, *Cracking the Corporate Code: The Revealing Success Stories of 32 African-American Executives*, Price M. Cobbs and Judith L. Turnock write, “A formal mentoring program can break the ice for you and provide early opportunities to begin learning how the organization really works, but it is important for *you* to cultivate those relationships that can exert a positive impact on your career.” Potential allies can be found at any time for any period of time at any level of an organization, they add.

Keeping Networking Real

Let’s return for a moment to that concept, touched on earlier by Dan Williams, that *real* networking is all about reciprocal relationships. This can’t be emphasized enough. In their book *Make Your Contacts Count: Networking Know-How for Cash, Clients, and Career Success*, Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon define networking as “the deliberate process of exchanging information, resources, support and access in such a way as to create mutually beneficial relationships for personal and professional success.”

The key terms are *exchanging* and *mutually beneficial*, Fraser underscores: “The emphasis is on the building of relationships and sharing what we can, because all of life is about working with others.”

Adds Toni Laws, executive director of the National Association of Minority Media Executives, “View networking as an opportunity to link to people in order to learn something about which you have little information or to make connections for other people.” Laws, who says she is not naturally a social butterfly and has to force herself out of her comfort zone to network, describes a network as a web with the points linked by threads consisting of people, information or resources that, where connected, hold the network or web together.

Suggested Resources for No Excuses Networking

In addition to the networking books and guides mentioned in this article—several of which are business classics—the following publications, Web sites and online networking communities can be valuable additions to your relationship-building toolbox.

In Print:

Dig Your Well Before You’re Thirsty
Harvey Mackay (author of *Swim With the Sharks*)

Creating Women’s Networks: A How-To Guide for Women and Companies
Catalyst

On the Web:

i2i Networking
www.i2inetworking.com

FraserNet
www.frasernet.com

Minority Professional Network
www.minorityprofessionalnetwork.com

LinkedIn
www.linkedin.com

Monster Networking
<http://network.monster.com>

Leading Ladies
www.leadingladies.com

Business Women’s Network
www.bwni.com

Business Network International
www.bni.com

ZeroDegrees
www.zerodegrees.com

Company of Friends—*Fast Company’s*
Readers’ Network
www.fastcompany.com/cof/

Effective Networking, Inc.
www.effectivenetworking.com

WetFeet—Managing Your Career:
Networking
www.wetfeet.com/advice/networking.asp

The Riley Guide—Networking &
Your Job Search
www.rileyguide.com/network.html

According to Sharon Fitzpatrick of The Fitzpatrick Group, a Virginia-based diversity and organizational development consulting firm specializing in helping employees implement effective relational strategies, “True networking is usually an enriching, empowering experience through which you’re meeting new people who will expand your perspective.” Fitzpatrick, who is pursuing an MBA in organizational development and human resources from Johns Hopkins University, also advises, “Learn how to follow up effectively on your contacts and maintain those relationships.”

Wrisë Booker, president of leadership development consulting firm Reid Dugger Consulting Group in La Palma, Calif., is still another expert who stresses that real networking is a two-way street, not a one-way ticket to getting what *you* want. “Avoid focusing on going out and papering the land with your business cards,” she says. “Working the room consumed by self-interest is an ineffective definition of networking that prevents you from getting your needs met and meeting those of others.”

Adds Mei-Mei Chan, vice president of circulation for *The Seattle Times* and *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, “Effective networking is not happenstance. It requires a disciplined strategy to build up your network of relationships to keep growing in your career.”



Wrisë Booker

What Color (and Gender) Is Your Network?

Self-evaluation is vital to creating an effective networking plan for yourself based on your own particular personality, preferences and values. Knowing yourself well can prevent networking discomfort because it allows you to choose the networking methods and options best suited for you. You may feel least comfortable in a room full of strangers and find interacting in small groups works better for you. Or you may prefer phone conversations to email.

Says Ortiz, “Avoid behavior that’s inconsistent with your natural style when you’re interacting with others, because your discomfort will be obvious to them, making them uncomfortable around you.”

Often, the obstacles to effective networking are as simple as poor etiquette, inappropriate dress and sloppy grooming and deportment. While these issues may seem superficial, they can create barriers that cannot be ignored or conquered by excellent performance or having “the right degree.” So, says Darling, “you should eliminate anything that eliminates you.”

But obstacles related to race and gender are not so easy to overcome and can present special challenges in relationship building for minority and women MBAs. For example, several studies by Catalyst, a nonprofit research organization that tracks the advancement of women in business, show that many women of color believe lack of access to influential networks and mentors are barriers to their advancement, even if they know how to network effectively.

In addition, it’s not uncommon for minority professionals of both genders to feel that developing personal connections with white colleagues in or outside their professional setting can be career suicide. They may fear revealing too much about themselves, which could lead to rumors and misconceptions or fuel stereotypes that create barriers they can’t overcome. Or, they believe promoting themselves and their successes as their white counterparts do is inappropriate or arrogant, so they silently hope performance alone will “speak for them.” Because past experiences may have caused some professionals of color to look through a lens of distrust, write Cobbs and Turnock, “in relationships with white colleagues, trust can be difficult to come by.”



William Ortiz

However, says Dr. Katherine Giscombe, who directed the groundbreaking Catalyst study *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Opportunities and Barriers*, “The successful African-American executives in this study told me that people of color need to very proactively and very strategically form relationships by taking small risks that allow a bit of themselves to show through.” Giscombe, who has studied women in MBA programs as well as minority women professionals, adds, “These [relationships] don’t have to be personal but can be related to a community event or hobby that you share in common with white colleagues, like golf. But interacting with coworkers is critical for professional success, so create your own corporate space by managing your corporate identity.”

Furthermore, says Peter Aranda, executive director of the Consortium for Graduate Study in Management, “Whether you’re a person of color or from the majority, the people in your networks should overlap groups. [To succeed] in corporate America, you need to have networks that include strong people from the majority as well as those from minority groups outside your own [race or ethnicity] who have navigated their own path in the majority world.”

Another networking roadblock facing today’s graduating MBAs is the generation gap between members of Generation X (those born between the early to mid 1960s and the mid to late 1970s) and the aging baby boomer population. Some GenXers are experiencing challenges in communicating effectively with their older colleagues because of each group’s often dramatically different career imperatives, personal values and personality styles.

But Wilny Audain, president of The Living Circle, a consulting firm that helps professionals maximize their potential, says, “GenXers who master the art of asking questions rather than making pronouncements that may make them seem arrogant to more seasoned professionals will be the most successful networkers in their organizations.”

You’re in the Driver’s Seat

Regardless of the challenges, learning to cultivate a network of relationships has become imperative to business success, especially for the professional person of color. “It’s part of taking control of your career and being proactive in your career strategy, rather than reactive,” asserts Michelle T. Johnson, author of *Working While Black: The Black Person’s Guide to Success in the White Workplace*.

Johnson sees overcoming obstacles to effective networking as being similar to defensive driving. “You’re in a big powerful instrument and others are in big, powerful instruments,” she explains. “Though you can’t ignore the dangers you face while driving, you can’t get so consumed by [worrying about them] that you can’t get to your destination.” You’ve got to get involved in your organization to get connected, she says, and not let the fact that mostly white folks (or baby boomers) play key roles on task forces and committees deter you.

“A key aspect of managing relationships,” write Cobbs and Turnock, “is learning to trust the organization and the individuals within it.”

Trust, they add, develops over time, but you must learn when to trust if you are to be successful and that requires letting go of the notion of being an outsider.

So the take-home message is this: Just as minority MBAs can develop technical competence in other areas of their careers, they can develop networking competence. Effective networking skills are simply effective relationship-building skills. Some of these skills you already have; the rest you can not only learn but master until networking becomes practically second nature.

“If you want to excel professionally in a highly competitive business environment, then it would be foolish not to know how to network,” Ortiz concludes. “Skillful relationship building is one of the tools you should have in your career arsenal.” ■

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Think You Can’t Network? Think Again!

You are networking when you:

- attend professional or trade association meetings
- talk to other parents when attending your child’s sporting or music events
- volunteer for a local park “clean-up” day
- visit with other members of your social clubs or religious groups
- talk to your neighbors
- strike up a conversation with someone else waiting at the veterinarian’s office or in line at the grocery store
- post messages on mailing lists or in chat rooms
- talk to salespersons who are visiting your office

Source: The Riley Guide
(www.rileyguide.com/network.html)