

Business Networking: Get Yourself Connected!

By Caroline Parry, Expert on the Education sector and a regular contributor to TopMBA.com

As the global employment market has contracted in the past three years in line with the global economic turmoil; having access to a wide and diverse range of contacts has never been more important.

According to research into corporate recruitment released by the Graduate Management Admissions Council (GMAC) in June, 76% of employers are now using staff referrals for recruitment; while just 29% are using traditional print advertising to announce vacancies.

Business networking has always been considered key to career development and access to the alumni network is frequently cited by MBA alumni as one of the major benefits of attending business school. Vanessa Gough, recruitment manager at IBM, says developing a network of contacts is 'vital' to a successful career.

"Building your networking skills will help you create business relationships, which can help to open doors and give you access to career opportunities," she adds, although she is keen to point out that networking is also about gaining access to skills and expertise that you do not possess. "So if you need help, or an answer to a question, there's always someone in your network who will be able to provide it - or find someone who can."

While few would argue with the importance of building and developing a bulging contacts book, the idea of networking fills the majority of people with dread and even fear. Heather White, chief executive and founder of Smarter Networking, a company that coaches people in networking skills, says it is important to remember that natural networkers are in the minority. "Maybe five or ten percent of people are naturals; for the rest of us, it's a task or discipline that is self-motivated."

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What is business networking?

In its most basic form, business networking is meeting new people at some kind of work event, a party, a conference or, perhaps, a formal dinner. While building and maintaining a network goes far beyond this, coping with face-to-face contact with strangers is the first fear that many have to conquer.

Karen Siegfried, MBA executive director at Judge Business School at the University of Cambridge, says that maintaining and cultivating contacts is critical. "If you neglect it, it is more time consuming to reignite it than it is to build a new one. People are increasingly realizing the importance of being called up for a drink or lunch."

Even as students, White believes MBAs should be aware of their personal brand, while Siegfried advises that planning and practicing an 'elevator pitch' is essential preparation for

networking. “You need to be clear about what you are looking for, your competencies, the value you would bring and you need to communicate that succinctly. It is your verbal business card.”

However, this does not mean that every encounter is all about the MBA pitching to potential employers. Trixie Rawlinson, a senior partner at Impact Factory, a training company that specializes in personal and professional development says it helps to act as a host and see the other person as a guest.

“At that moment when your mind goes blank and your mouth is dry, think about what they might want. Do they need a drink? Is there someone that you could introduce them to? If you are just thinking me, me, me then you will panic. Remember, everyone feels difficult in these scenarios but people will always like you if you are nice.”

She says it is also important to leave a conversation properly as people “tend to slope off” or make excuses. “Own up when you want the conversation to end and thank the person for their time. It is much worse when people can’t finish a conversation but, on the other hand, don’t leave them standing alone.”

Online networking

The rise of online social networking is also having impact on how students can make and maintain contacts. IBM’s Gough says the company has used both Twitter and Facebook for both its student and graduate recruitment. She says: “For example, we have used Facebook to connect with our new starters before their commencement date to answer any questions they may have or to help facilitate their finding appropriate accommodation for their placement.”

Meanwhile, Rachel Barker, alumni relations manager at Cambridge Judge Business School says that platforms such as business networking site Linked-In are useful for people keeping in touch despite being in different time zones and they can also help people to find common ground more easily.

“But choose your platforms carefully, check your Facebook page and make sure you are happy with what is there as potential employers will check.”

Rebecca Joffrey, co-director of career development office at Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, says online networking is changing the formality of the first encounter that you have with people. “It helps you jump levels of formality very quickly. On the one hand, that’s very helpful but I don’t know how it affects the networking transaction and if it is the right way to go.”

The growth of social networking makes it very tempting for people to eschew the face-to-face events in favour of hiding behind their keyboard; for Siegfried it has elevated the importance of face to face meetings and phone calls. “People want to see who you are when it comes to recruiting,” she explains.

Developing business networking skills – both on and offline – will be critical both during the MBA itself and for the next step afterwards.

As Gough says: “I once heard a very successful executive say: “It’s not who you know, it’s who knows you. Your network is where your next role will come from, where you get support and information, and where you develop the relationships with your colleagues that will be valuable as you progress through the company.”

The QS World MBA Tour will be visiting the Middle East from the 9th of December till the 15th of December in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Manama. Candidates can register now at www.topmba.com

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