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Building Your Network Takes More than Business Cards and Cocktail Receptions – It Requires a Strategy

By Diane Costigan

No matter what your career, in order to be successful you need to invite and encourage people to participate in it. You need people to give you work; to send you business; to recommend you for new jobs and other exciting opportunities; to give you feedback on your performance; even to let you blow off steam when needed. Your network consists of those who can help you move forward in your career and to enjoy it along the way.

Note that the word “work” is in the word “network”. Healthy and strong professional networks do not build and manage themselves. They require care and feeding. Networking often gets a bad rap because people associate it with cocktail receptions and handing out business cards. Building a solid professional network can take many more forms that may be more aligned to your personality. Unfortunately, high demands on a lawyer’s time often prevent network building from receiving the level of attention and priority that it should.

Start With a Solid Career Vision

Many lawyers network on the fly when they can find the time. While this is better than nothing, not all network building activities will be a productive use of time. When tied closely with a strategic vision and goals, however, investing time building and maintaining relationships can be a powerful career advancement tool. Unfortunately, therein lies the problem. Busy lawyers do not always have the opportunity to think about the bigger career picture.

Your career is the one thing you can be selfish about because, really, no one else can have or do your career for you. At least once a year (but preferably more) think strategically about where you are and where you want to be with respect to your career. Timing this exercise to an annual performance review can be meaningful. Once you are clear on your vision, set goals that support your career objectives.

Do you want to be a partner in a law firm? If so, your network building may focus more on business development. Does going part-time while pursuing other interests sound appealing? Finding a support network of other part-timers might be helpful. Have you always wanted to be a judge? Contacts more on the government or political side might make more sense. Is the draw of academia and professorship calling you? Reaching out to your law school professors could be a good idea.

Set Specific Network Building Goals That Support Your Career Vision

Consider how network building fits into your career strategy. Establish specific goals and targets around building and managing your network and block out time in your calendar and do them. For example, you might commit to do a minimum of 3 networking activities once a week, month or quarter – whatever works for you. Keep in mind, they do not always have to be time intensive things. You could send out quick touching base emails; forward articles that might be interesting; call a former colleague, classmate or client, etc.

Define Your Network

A good place to start is to define your current network. To effectively build or manage something, you need to have a good grasp of where you are starting from. What is the composition of your network? Is it almost exclusively lawyers? If so, how does that support your career vision and goals?

If you are worried that you do not have a big network, fear not, it is probably a lot bigger than you believe it to be. In my experience, with some creative brainstorming, there are always a significant number of people who can be added to your network.

Tips for Defining Your Network:

- Analyze your network through the lens of your career vision: Have you included everyone you know who could support this vision?
- Write your autobiography: Consider all of the areas of your life both past and present (school; camp; neighbors; gym; hobbies; activities; commuter acquaintances; etc.) Sometimes reminiscing about major events in your life and the people who have impacted you can spark some additional entries to your network.
- Understand who those in your network know: The beauty of your network is that the people in it also know other people. If you make a good impression on someone, you will likely get access to those in their network as well.

Quality of Contacts, Not Quantity is Key

Another common myth about networking is that you have to constantly add contacts to it. Having a lot of business cards and contacts is not necessarily a good thing if they are not relevant to your career vision, professional and personal goals and your greater values. They will just take up space in your address book and delay searching for those contacts that can make a difference. Websites like Facebook and Linked In make it fairly easy to locate people these days so do not worry about keeping every card you ever get.

Contact Maintenance Tips:

- Go through your contacts twice a year: Just like purging clothes in a packed closet, keep only those contacts with which you regularly have some level of contact.

- Set guidelines: Determine who stays in your contacts system and who does not. For example, if they are a casual contact you met once and have not spoken to or heard from in two years, delete them. In terms of managing your own time, you may choose to only network with people you like and whose company you enjoy.
- Keep a focus on your important contacts: Use your periodic contacts review as a reminder of who is important to be maintaining relationships with. Reach out to them and make sure to get them on your calendar.
- Create a “contact info” folder in your email system: People move jobs and change contact information regularly. If you do not have time to update your contact information immediately, move it to a “contact info” folder so you can reference it later. Revisit this folder and update when you go through your contact review exercise.

Evaluate Your Progress

If you set aside a certain chunk of time each week for the purpose of organizing, planning and scheduling – which I highly recommend from a time management perspective – make your network building goals a standing agenda item. Evaluate yourself each week and redirect your efforts when necessary to stay on track. If you use Outlook or something similar, keep a folder entitled “Network Building”. Move emails that spark your memory that you need to reach out to someone or schedule a lunch to that folder.

Your career vision will provide a layer of organization and planning to network building that will help you use your time productively and strategically. Keeping your network organized and healthy and having meaningful relationships with those in your network can help ensure that you have the right people participating in your career.

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