Managing Yourself
Learn to Love Networking

Even people who find it repugnant can do it effectively.
by Tiziana Casciaro, Francesca Gino, and Maryam Kouchaki

"I HATE NETWORKING." We hear this all the time from executives, other professionals, and MBA students. They tell us that networking makes them feel uncomfortable and phony—even dirty. Although some people have a natural passion for it—namely, the extroverts who love and thrive on social interaction—many understandably see it as brown-nosing, exploitative, and inauthentic.

But in today's world, networking is a necessity. A mountain of research shows that professional networks lead to more job and business opportunities, broader and deeper knowledge, improved capacity to innovate, faster advancement, and greater status and authority. Building and nurturing professional relationships also improves the quality of work and increases job satisfaction.

When we studied 165 lawyers at a large North American law firm, for example, we found that their success depended on their ability to network effectively both internally (to get themselves assigned to choice clients) and externally (to bring business into the firm). Those who regarded these activities as distasteful and avoided them had fewer billable hours than their peers.

Fortunately, our research shows that an aversion to networking can be overcome. We've identified four strategies to help people change their mindset.

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1 Focus on Learning

Most people have a dominant motivational focus—what psychologists refer to as either a "promotion" or a "prevention" mindset. Those in the former category think primarily about the growth, advancement, and accomplishments that networking can bring them, while those in the latter see it as something they are obligated to take part in for professional reasons.

In laboratory experiments we conducted in the United States and Italy with college students and working adults, and in an additional sample of 174 lawyers at the firm we studied, we documented the effects of both types of thinking. Promotion-focused people networked because they wanted to and approached the activity with excitement, curiosity, and an open mind about all the possibilities that might unfold. Prevention-focused people saw networking as a necessary evil and felt inauthentic while engaged in it, so they did it less often and, as a result, underperformed in aspects of their jobs.

Thankfully, as Stanford University's Carol Dweck has documented in her research, it's possible to shift your mindset from prevention to promotion, so that you see networking as an opportunity for discovery and learning rather than a chore.

Consider a work-related social function you feel obliged to attend. You can tell yourself, "I hate these kinds of events. I'm going to have to put on a show and schmooze and pretend to like it." Or you can tell yourself, "Who knows—it could be interesting. Sometimes when you least expect it, you have a conversation that brings up new ideas and leads to new experiences and opportunities."

If you are an introvert, you can't simply will yourself to be extroverted, of course. But everyone can choose which motivational focus to bring to networking. Concentrate on the positives—how it's going to help you boost the knowledge and skills that are needed in your job—and the activity will begin to seem much more worthwhile.

2 Identify Common Interests

The next step in making networking more palatable is to think about how your interests and goals align with those of people you meet and how that can help you forge meaningful working relationships. Northwestern University's Brian Uzzi calls this the shared activities principle. "Potent networks are not forged through casual interactions but through relatively high-stakes activities that connect you with diverse others," he explains. (See "How to Build Your Network," HBR, December 2005.) Numerous studies in social psychology have demonstrated that people establish the most collaborative and longest-lasting connections when they work together on tasks that require one another's contributions. Indeed, research that one of

After California mandated paid family leave, in 2004, **fathers were 46% likelier** to take paternity leave in the first year of their child's life. The main participants were first-time fathers, fathers with sons, and those in occupations with a high share of female workers.

"PAID FAMILY LEAVE, FATHERS' LEAVE-TAKING, AND LEAVE-SHARING IN DUAL-EARNER HOUSEHOLDS," BY ANN BARTEL ET AL.

us (Tiziana) conducted with INSEAD's Miguel Sousa Lobo showed that this "task interdependence" can be one of the biggest sources of positive energy in professional relationships.

Consider the approach taken by Claude Grunitzky, a serial entrepreneur in the media industries, when he set out to meet Jefferson Hack, founder of the underground British style and music magazine *Dazed & Confused.* As described in a Harvard Business School case study by Julie Battilana, Lakshmi Ramarajan, and James Weber, Grunitzky—then 22 and preparing to found his first business, an urban hip-hop magazine in London—learned everything he could about Hack.

"I read every one of his magazines, noticed what he was writing about and what kinds of bands he reviewed," Grunitzky recalled. "I did so much of this I felt I could almost understand his personality before we met." Armed with that knowledge and convinced that he and Hack had similar worldviews and aspirations, Grunitzky felt much more comfortable approaching the industry elder.

When your networking is driven by substantive, shared interests you've identified through serious research, it will feel more authentic and meaningful and is more likely to lead to relationships that have those qualities too.

3 Think Broadly About What You Can Give

Even when you do not share an interest with someone, you can probably find something valuable to offer by thinking beyond the obvious. Of course, this isn't always easy. We've found that people who feel powerless—because they are junior in their organizations, because they

belong to a minority, or for other reasons—often believe they have too little to give and are therefore the least likely to engage in networking, even though they're the ones who will probably derive the most benefit from it.

This problem was highlighted in two studies we conducted at the law firm mentioned above, which involved different groups of lawyers at different points in time. We found that senior people were typically much more comfortable networking than junior people were because of their greater power in the organization. This makes sense. When people believe they have a lot to offer others, such as wise advice, mentorship, access, and resources, networking feels easier and less selfish.

A controlled experiment confirmed this finding: People in whom we induced feelings of power found networking less repulsive and were more willing to do it than people assigned to a condition that made them feel powerless.

However, even those with lower rank and less power almost certainly have more to offer than they realize. In their book *Influence Without Authority,* Allan Cohen and David Bradford note that most people tend to think too narrowly about the resources they have that others might value. They focus on tangible, task-related things such as money, social connections, technical support, and information, while ignoring less obvious assets such as gratitude, recognition, and enhanced reputation. For instance, although mentors typically like helping others, they tend to enjoy it all the more when they are thanked for their assistance.

The more heartfelt the expression of gratitude, the greater its value to

If Networking Makes You Feel Dirty, You're Not Alone

Many people find professional networking so distasteful that it makes them feel morally and physically dirty. In a controlled experiment, we asked 306 adults working at various organizations to write about times when they engaged either in networking for professional advancement or in social networking to make friends. We then asked them to complete word fragments, such as **W _ _ H, S H _ _ E R,** and **S _ _ P**—a measure of subconscious preferences first used by Chen-Bo Zhong, of the Rotman School of Management, and Katie Liljenquist, of the Marriott School of Management.

Participants who had recalled professional networking wrote **"WASH," "SHOWER,"** and **"SOAP"**—words associated with cleanliness—twice as frequently as those who had recalled social networking, who more often wrote neutral words such as **"WISH," "SHAKER,"** and **"STEP."** In other words, although most participants viewed networking to socialize and make friends as positive, they saw networking to enhance their careers as distinctly negative. Their negativity was not simply dislike or discomfort. It was a deeper feeling of moral contamination and inauthenticity.

the recipient. One young professional we know told us that when she turned 30, she wrote to the 30 people she felt had contributed the most to her professional growth, thanking them and describing the specific ways each had helped her. The recipients no doubt appreciated the personalized update and acknowledgement.

When gratitude is expressed publicly, it can also enhance an adviser's reputation in the workplace. Think of the effect you have when you sing your boss's praises to your colleagues and superiors, outlining all the ways you've progressed under his or her tutelage.

When your networking is driven by substantive, shared interests, it will feel more authentic and meaningful.

People also appreciate those who understand their values and identities and make them feel included. Juan, an Argentinian executive based in the Toronto office of a Canadian property management company, told us about Hendrik, a junior hire from Germany who rallied everyone in the office to join a series of soccer games that he single-handedly organized. His fellow expats—and there were many, because the company's workforce was internationally diverse—finally had something fun to do with their colleagues, and Hendrik's status and connections immediately shot up. In spite of his low-power position,

he had brought something new to the table.

You might also have unique insights or knowledge that could be useful to those with whom you're networking. For example, junior people are often better informed than their senior colleagues about generational trends and new markets and technologies. Grunitzky is a prime example. "I knew I could bring something to [Jefferson Hack], which was expertise in hip-hop," he said. The relationship ended up being a two-way street.

When you think more about what you can give to others than what you can get from them, networking will seem less self-promotional and more selfless—and therefore more worthy of your time.

4 Find a Higher Purpose

Another factor that affects people's interest in and effectiveness at networking is the primary purpose they have in mind when they do it. In the law firm we studied, we found that attorneys who focused on the collective benefits of making connections ("support my firm" and "help my clients") rather than on personal ones ("support or help my career") felt more authentic and less dirty while networking, were more likely to network, and had more billable hours as a result.

Any work activity becomes more attractive when it's linked to a higher goal. So frame your networking in those terms. We've seen this approach help female executives overcome their discomfort about pursuing relationships with journalists and publicists. When we remind them that women's voices are underrepresented in business and that the media attention that would

Further Reading
For more about networking, see these articles at HBR.org.

"How Leaders Create and Use Networks"
Herminia Ibarra and Mark Lee Hunter

"A Smarter Way to Network"
Rob Cross and Robert J. Thomas

"How Star Women Build Portable Skills"
Boris Groysberg

"Succeed in New Situations"
Keith Rollag

"How to Build Your Network"
Brian Uzzi and Shannon Dunlap

"The Art of Evangelism"
Guy Kawasaki

result from their building stronger networks might help counter gender bias, their deep-seated reluctance often subsides.

Andrea Stairs, managing director of eBay Canada, had just such a change in perspective. "I had to get over the feeling that it would be self-centered and unseemly to put myself out there in the media," she told us. "I realized that my visibility is actually good for my company and for the image of women in the business world in general. Seeing my media presence as a way to support my colleagues and other professional women freed me to take action and embrace connections I didn't formerly cultivate."

MANY IF not most of us are ambivalent about networking. We know that it's critical to our professional success, yet we find it taxing and often distasteful. These strategies can help you overcome your aversion. By shifting to a promotion mindset, identifying and exploring shared interests, expanding your view of what you have to offer, and motivating yourself with a higher purpose, you'll become more excited about and effective at building relationships that bear fruit for everyone. ◖

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Tiziana Casciaro is an associate professor of organizational behavior and holds the Professorship in Leadership Development at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. **Francesca Gino** is a professor at Harvard Business School, a faculty affiliate of the Behavioral Insights Group at Harvard Kennedy School, and the author of *Sidetracked: Why Our Decisions Get Derailed, and How We Can Stick to the Plan* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2013). Twitter: @francescagino. **Maryam Kouchaki** is an assistant professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.