Network Like Nobody's Watching: Demystifying Networking as a Skill for the Librarian and Information Professional Community.

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Introduction

According to William W. Purkey, "You've gotta dance like there's nobody watching, love like you'll never be hurt, sing like there's nobody listening, and live like it's heaven on earth." This philosophy can easily be applied to the skill of networking. Contrary to popular opinion, it is a skill and not an innate personality trait. You have to network like no one is watching, meaning, be unencumbered by self-conscious behavior and own your professional development. Networking is an important skill to practice, hone, and have in your professional development toolkit. It is a skill that can be particularly difficult for Information Professionals to master. Too often, the label of "introvert" will be used as an excuse as to why someone hasn't mastered this skill. In this paper, the importance of networking as a skill, and not a byproduct of a personality trait, will be discussed. We will also address strategies and tools that information professionals can use to become better networkers and develop a network that is strong, diverse, and helps them get to where they want to go in their career.

The Importance of Networking

Networking is the most important weapon in your career arsenal, no matter what stage of professional development you are in. It is just as important for the new MLIS student as it is for a seasoned library director. In his book, *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*, Ronald Burt, of the Chicago Booth School of Business, showed how people with better networks receive higher performance ratings, get promoted faster, and earn more money.

Not only does networking benefit the career you have now, but it also helps you get to the next level of your career, or move into a new area that you are interested in, or see as important to your professional development. Expanding your network lets you connect with people in all stages of their careers, to learn from them, and, in turn, let them learn from you. Networking is a two way street, a mutually beneficial activity that helps all who engage in it.

One of the most used phrases in job searching and career development is, "It's who you know." This phrase is used because it is accurate; having a large professional network gives you a distinct advantage when you network. Another way to think of this is that it is not who you know but also who knows you, and who knows what you are looking for. The lead author of this article had this experience in her last job hunt which resulted in her current position. After being

laid-off from her public library position due to budget cuts she was hunting for a position with the goal of moving back into corporate librarianship. Unexpectedly, a connection that she had made at a large athletic footwear and apparel company called her and told her about a library position that had opened up at this company. This position was not labeled a library position and thus had not made it on any of the library job posting web sites. She was able to apply to this position and her contact at the company was able to talk to the hiring manager before her interview. The author would have never even known that this position was available if not for the contact that she had made and maintained at this company. The author now very happily works for this company in a position that completely aligns with her professional goals.

This is a prime example of how having a extensive professional network can work for you. Having a network and using that network will help you in your professional career and professional development. But if you don't harness the power of networking or use your network when you need it;, for instance, when searching for a new job, you are under utilizing one of the most powerful tools in your tool kit. Use your network, keep it current, and tap it when you need it.

Networking is A Skill: Use it or Lose it.

The ability to network and connect with people is a skill, not a personality trait, and like many skills, some people are better at it naturally than others. But that doesn't mean that it can't be learned, improved upon, and mastered by anyone. Just because you have a job, or are completely happy with your position, it does not mean you should stop networking. Networking can help you in the position that you are currently in. Your network is a resource that you can access when you need advice, are stuck on a problem, or just need someone to bounce ideas off of.

There are many different ways that people learn new skills, so it is important to figure out the best method for you to learn new networking skills, and keep your skill sharp. For some this is research and reading. There are numerous books and articles out there about networking and and effective networking strategies. For some it is going to lectures and talks, since networking is a skill that all professions need you can usually find events and speakers in your area that address this topic. Watch for local business and law schools to have talks on the subject. Even if you have great confidence in your networking abilities, it is good to hear others' experiences and strategies. For some, actually networking is the way they learn new skills and get more comfortable with the activity.

Practice your networking and connection skills on a daily basis. Like any skill, it will get rusty if you do not use it. Get out from behind that desk, or out of that cubical and talk to people. Your place or work is the best place to practice your networking skills and where you can see the most immediate effects of your networking efforts. Get to know people who work in other departments, learning about other peoples' roles is a great way to get an idea of what your overall organization does and how you fit into that organization. Practice your skills on your family members, your close friends. If you start practicing networking at your place of work and your daily life, it will be much easier when you have an event to

Own Your Professional Development

Only you know where you want to go in your professional development, or you might not know where you want to go yet. Networking and developing your professional network can help in both these instances. By developing a large and diverse professional network, you are furthering your professional development by connecting with people who are further along in the career path of your choice. By connecting with them and learning from their experiences, you will be better prepared for the type of career you want. Having people in your network with experiences and knowledge that you can tap when needed gives you an advantage when it comes to your own personal professional development

Networking and developing a network that you can rely on also gives you an advantage if you are unsure of the career path that you want to take, or are looking to move into a new career path. Expanding your network to new areas that might interest you not only gives you insight into that area but also helps you identify skills that you might need to move into that area. This is also true when connecting with people farther along in their professional development. You can learn from them what they did to get to where they are. The classes they took, the books they read, the people who mentored them. One of the biggest benefits to having a diverse network is that it helps you own your own professional development. Only you know what you need or want out of your professional development. Use and expand your professional network to get where you want to go, and to identify what skills you need to work on to move on to attain your professional goals.

Networking for the Informational Professional

Networking does not always take place at formal events or even in person. It can take many forms, through social media, via email, over the phone etc. As information professionals, it is important that you find what works for you. This does not mean that you should not practice the skills that were addressed in the previous sections, but it does mean that you need to know what your strengths are and how to best utilize them to your advantage. In truth, a combination of networking styles is more effective and will help you develop skills that you can use in your professional development. The below strategies can be used to maximize your networking effectiveness.

Prepare and Practice

While some networking happens spontaneously, most of the time you will know when you will be in a situation that requires networking. It is best to go in prepared. Are you going to a conference or other professional event? Look on-line and see who is also coming to that event. That can help you know who you are going to talk to and see if there is anyone you want to meet or even already know. Applications like MeetingMatch are growing in popularity and can easily assist you with making quality connections at a specific meeting or event. Before the event make a goal of how many people you want to connect with. Often having a goal of how many people you want to connect is a great way to motivate yourself to talk to people that you would not normally approach at events.

Do your research! Before going to an event think, of what types of questions you are going to ask. While you might have a lot in common with the people that you are going to meet,

especially if you are networking at a conference, you will still want to have questions to ask. Open ended questions are the best to ask people as it will help both of you become engaged in the conversation. It is also important to always have business cards to pass out. Even if you do not have professional business cards, you can have some made with your information on them to give out to people at events you attend. Are you nervous about attending large events? Start by practicing your networking at smaller events, or more informal events where you know people. You can practice asking questions and getting comfortable introducing yourself to people that you do not know. No one says that huge networking events have to be your first experience. Find a size of group that works for you and when you feel more comfortable move on to bigger groups and events.

Have a Networking Wingperson

For some people, especially newer graduates, having a networking Wingperson--a Goose to your Maverick, a Ted to your Barney--can be especially effective in developing your own personal network, as well as expanding your existing network. Having someone you know you can rely on to make introductions and who knows the lay of the professional landscape can be a good way to start developing your own personal network. How do you find that perfect networking Wingperson, though? If you know someone at your place of work that has more experience than you, ask them to introduce you to people or attend a networking event with you. If you know someone that is more outgoing than you and more comfortable in large social situations, have them attend an event with you even if they do not know anyone. Often having someone that feels comfortable talking to complete strangers will help break the ice and then let you ease into the conversation as well, if those sorts of situations are a challenge for you.

If you have identified someone that you think will be a good Wingperson, and they have agreed to attend an event, sit down with them before the event and chat with them about what you want to get out of the event and who you want to meet. Having a game plan before you go to an event can really help. It lets them know what you want to get out of the event and often it will also help you feel more comfortable by knowing what to expect.

It is also important to remember that you can have multiple Wingpersons. Remember, the bigger and more diverse your network, the more effective you will be at networking. You can have many different Wingpersons for different parts of your professional development. It is also important to be a Wingperson yourself. Once you are established, do not be afraid to pass on your experience and knowledge to others. Pay it forward. Even if you think that your network is small, be open to introducing new people to it. If someone contacts you out of the blue, be gracious and open to their questions, even if you can't help them. You never know where people are going to end up so keeping lines of communication open can beneficial to both parties.

Join a Professional Organization

Before starting this section it is important to acknowledge that both authors of this paper are heavily involved with the Special Libraries Association (SLA) and have a bias for the superiority of that professional organization over other library professional organizations. That being said, joining a professional organization can be one of the most effective ways for professionals to network with other professionals with the same interests and goals. Often, one of the biggest roadblocks when networking is worrying about what you will talk about or have in

common with the people that you are meeting. By joining a professional organization, you are automatically going to meet people with the same professional interest as you. Library professional organizations, such as SLA, are often divided into sections and divisions that are more specific to your professional interests. These groups are a great way to network if you find that smaller, informal events are what you prefer. In SLA many of the divisions and chapters have professional development or networking chairs. Getting in touch with them is a great way to meet people or just let them know that you are now a part of this group. These groups also have events at their annual conferences that can be easier to manage for some people than the large all conference events.

If you want to get the most out of your professional organization, hopefully SLA, also try and become involved at the committee level. Not only does committee work help you with your overall professional development, it also helps you network with others on your committee and other committees as well. This helps you expand your network, while also meeting people that share the same professional interests as you. Committee work can also be a good way for people that are new to networking to dip your toes into the preverbal networking pond.

It is also important, if you have the means or employer support, to try and attend your professional organization's annual conference. Not only will you be able to attend sessions that will help you gain knowledge to further your professional development, it will also help you meet people and make connections that expand your existing network. These annual conferences have events that are specifically geared towards networking and helping their members take advantage of having many information professionals in one place at one time. If you do not have the means to attend annual conferences look into attending local conferences. Often your state library association will have a conference. These conferences are less expensive, but still have benefits to attending. Even if you are a special librarian, with little in common with our more traditionally employed library colleges, these conferences can help you meet other information professionals in your area, and get to know your local library community even better.

Use Social Media

Social Media can be a great place to network, especially if networking in person is a challenge for you. In order of professional effectiveness, as per the opinion of the authors, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr. All of these social media outlets have active information professional communities. Use that to your advantage. Make connections over these outlets with other professionals that share the same interests as you, or are in an area of the profession that you would like to move into. If networking in large groups is not your strength this could be your area to shine. If you are engaging with other people in a thoughtful way on these platforms, you are networking.

Many of the professional communities also host events like twitter chats; these are online events where people talk about a specific topics, and often questions are asked of the community. Twitter chats are effective ways to see what your colleagues think and to identify thought-leaders on certain subjects. The only requirements are a Twitter account and a basic understanding of how to Tweet. SLA has Twitter chats named #SLAtalk that brings members and non-members together to converse about a series of set questions. Past topics have included the job search process, marketing and promotion, fiscal organization, and general professional discourse. These

Twitter chats often involve participants from all over the world with varying levels of professional experience. Although the exchange of ideas is succinct, as per the constraints of Twitter, it is a quick, easy and excellent way to gather ideas and advice from a wide variety of people at once. If you identify participants whose ideas you like, it is encouraged to follow them and even Tweet at them to make a connection. This is a great way to interact with others and expand your network.

These social media connections can be a very effective way of helping you connect with others in the profession. It also gives you a network to call on when you have questions, or just want to learn about other peoples' experiences. Both authors of this paper have found Twitter an extremely effective way of networking. In fact, the authors met on Twitter and have only met in-person for the first time at the conference this paper is being presented at. Both have also used Twitter to connect with people in person, at conferences and events, that they have only known on Twitter.

Do Not Be Afraid of a Little Shameless Self-Promotion:

Since information professionals are often in service roles, it can be hard for us to promote what we do and who we are. Do not be afraid to talk about what you do and who you are when meeting new people and expanding your professional network. Having an elevator speech about who you are and what you do is a great weapon to have in your networking arsenal. It lets you feel comfortable when people ask you, "What do you do?" It also lets you make the best possible impression at events and in meeting new people. Not only does this help you network it will also help you in your professional life. Having a sound byte to give your boss or supervisor is a great way to promote what you do and advocate for yourself.

If you have an online presence, do not be afraid to promote it. Do you have a blog, or are you active on Twitter? These are great things to talk about or promote. The authors have found that having stickers with their social media information to put on the back of their business cards is effective. They have also found that including their online handles on their conference badges is an effective way to meet people they have interacted with online and to build connections with in person at events.

Often people feel that self -promotion is "dirty" or will make them come off as egotistical or self-involved. While you don't want to spend your whole conversation talking about yourself, you do want to highlight your strengths and accomplishments. Be authentic when you talk about yourself; most people can spot when someone is being fake, so do your best to be yourself. According to Judith Humphrey it is also important to promote your accomplishments and not just yourself. Talk about an important project you did, highlight how it benefited you organization. She also suggests practicing "safe bragging." Start small, talk to your close friends and relatives about what you are doing and why you are proud of it. Once you feel comfortable doing it in small groups graduating to larger events and your work environment will be much easier.

Perfect the Art of the Follow-Up

You have done your research. You have your Wingperson. You went to the event and talked to at least 3 people. You handed out business cards. You asked good questions.

Now what?

Following up after the event can be just as important as the networking event itself. In fact, following up is the main way that you cement new relationships and build your professional network. Do not approach networking with the Underwear Gnome business plan. What is that? The Underwear Gnomes appeared on the popular TV Show South Park in 1998. They stole underwear at night and had a very interesting business plan to sell it. It consisted of: 1. steal underwear, 2. ???, 3. Profit. (Cantor, 2006) Many people seem to approach networking much as the Underwear Gnomes approached business they 1. Network, 2. ???, 3. Professional Connections/Profit! for networking to be beneficial to your professional development you must perfect the art of following up, that is your step two.

When at a networking event it is important to develop strategies that help you remember who you would like to follow up with. Some find writing a few notes on the back of peoples' buisness cards can help them remember who they want to connect with after the event is over. Some find that writing notes immediately after the event helps them remember who they want to follow-up with.

After a networking event, it is also important to set aside time to follow-up with the people that you want to make connections with. If it is at your place of business, it can be as simple as setting aside time to leave your office or cubicle to go say hello and thank you to someone you made a connection with. If it is not someone at your place of work, set aside time to follow up with them via email or phone.

According to Allison Jones, one of the things that makes people bad at networking is the lack of following up. She suggests that you always thank them. Getting into the habit of thanking people for their generosity, whether it was giving you some good job advice, introducing you to someone, or helping you make an important professional connection, generosity is the key to building lasting personal and professional connections. She also suggests sending a "gift" to people that you want to make connections with and show your appreciation to; by gift, she means articles that you read that you think might interest them based on your conversations, a job opportunity that you know they might be interested in, or an upcoming event that they might like to attend. Being helpful and generous can only help you expand your network and make those connections that will help you further your professional development.

As part of following up with new contacts, it is also important that you help others expand their network as well. Earlier in this paper, we have already discussed the importance of paying it forward. Paying it forward can be an important part of following-up with new contacts. It can be as simple as connecting someone you have just met with someone who is already in your network that has similar interests. Not only does it help the new person that you have just met, but it also helps you and the person that you are connecting them to. Paying it forward is one of the easiest ways to build your professional network.

Conclusion:

As library and information professionals, networking is an important part of our professional development toolkit. It is an important skill that has to be practiced and perfected.

Developing and effective professional networking takes hard work and dedication. Hopefully, empowered with the above techniques you will be able to approach your next networking event with confidence, so you can network free from self-consciousness - like no one is watching.

Endnotes

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