Networking for Survival
by Deborah Mills-Scofield  |  9:51 AM December 30, 2011

We think about networking as a very modern notion, with our accumulation of virtual "friends," "followers," and people -who-might-be-useful-to-us-someday. To me, it is just an extension of what my people, my family have been doing since 70 AD — making critical connections that enable both our survival. The tools may have changed, but our reliance on the network has not. In fact, without the network, I literally wouldn't be alive.

My mother and grandparents fled the Nazis in Eastern Europe, bribing the American Consulate to make quotas. Virtually all members of my family, over sixty people of all ages, were killed at Auschwitz. The few family members who escaped — a cousin sent to London to live with relatives, an uncle who fled to Israel (then Palestine), another who survived work camps in Budapest, another who escaped barefoot running through forests and ended up in Australia, another who fought in the French Resistance, and another who was liberated at Auschwitz in 1945 — formed a worldwide network that was requisite for survival.

Because of my background, I'm hardwired to network. This reliance on and ability to network has been pivotal throughout my life and my career. Adding to John Hagel and John Seely Brown's sage advice (http://blogs.hbr.org/bigshift/2011/01/five-tips-for-smarter-social-n.html), I have three suggestions for those looking to develop or improve their network: 1) use new communication tools to your advantage; 2) let the network be a resource for discovery and growth; and 3) treat your network well.

1. When new forms of communication emerge, don't just look at how to improve what you're doing already, but at new ways of doing. How can these new tools give you access to new ideas, people, perspectives, and solutions you wouldn't normally encounter? How can these tools help you discover the unarticulated needs of existing markets and customers, maybe even discover entirely new markets and/or new business models? Since you can't be in several places at once, how can these tools let you leverage "location" for discovery globally? Could these tools help you increase collaboration within your own company?

As a student at Brown University in the early '80s, I had a terminal in my room connected to the Computer Science Department's Unix machines. I kept in touch with high school friends via email. For me in the early '80's, this was normal — the fledging 'net was just another tool, like pen, paper and the telephone. My Bell Labs internships were all about the network. I met fascinating, amazing people all over the world who I would never have met without the network, and who expand my worldview and knowledge to this day.

2. No matter how good you and your team are, you simply can't know everything. The network allows you to learn about new materials, processes, products and technologies that you wouldn't otherwise discover that could help your company grow. What you know depends on who you know, which depends on what you know, so let the network expand the "who" so you can expand the "what" and bring new solutions to the market. This is what many companies do with Open Innovation. You also can use the network to distribute "jobs" so you can more efficiently and effectively experiment, prototype, test and commercialize new customer offerings.

At Bell Labs, where I played after graduating (yes, played — Google had nothing on Bell Labs!), the simple tools we had like Netnews and Usenet allowed us to collaborate with people all over the world and in different industries. Since

my job was designing the network and its applications, the network let me learn about new applications in Japan and
discuss an idea with researchers in Israel. We used the network to share design specs, pictures, results of
experiments and collaborate on wicked interesting problems across the globe. I was working on the edge, as John
Hagel says, without realizing it.

3. Treat your network well. It is not a renewable energy source. As Whitney Johnson elucidated
(http://blogs.hbr.org/ohnson/2011/04/building-a-network-that-works.html), a network needs to be cultivated and
nurtured. You are a steward of your network — use it for yourself but more so for the benefit of others. The more you
share your network, the more it grows and increases in value and meaning to everyone.

When I first moved to Oberlin, OH, I commuted weekly to my AT&T office in New Jersey or somewhere else in the
world. AT&T provided me all the network tools: a cell phone, voice and data network in my home, PC, laptop, etc.
Commuting grew old, but when I decided to start my own business in Northeast Ohio, I didn't know anyone in the
business community. I contacted the Cleveland chapter of the Brown Alumni Club and although it took work,
everything flowed from there — my clients, the VC Company I'm a partner in, collaborations and amazing friendships.
In turn, my expanding network has been a joy to share with others as I watch them discover opportunities — from
students I mentor to adults looking for new jobs.

For me, the network is literal survival. My family, throughout history, escaped to places where we had family or
friends who would support, hide, and in the case of America letting my mom and grandparents enter, sponsor us. No
sponsor, no entry; no entry, Auschwitz. Without the network, the odds of survival were slim to none. Fortunately, for
most of us this is not the case. But don't let that negate the importance of the network for your survival:

Without the network, you don't get new ideas into your organization, you don't see trends and issues that affect you
and your customers, you don't grow and develop your people with new challenges and opportunities, you aren't
attractive for young talent, you don't learn about new technologies or business models, you don't create new markets
and you risk deluding yourself with your own ideas. You don't increase your own value and advance your own career.
Without the network you stagnate, you become stale. With the network you grow, provide meaningful and valuable
solutions to your customers and not just survive, but thrive.