Networking Behavior: A Reflection on the Past and New Directions for the Future

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Abstract

Networking is a vital career management strategy, and is arguably more important today with the advent of social media and the opportunity to develop relationships with individuals around the globe. In this paper, I provide a brief review of the networking literature focusing on the definition of networking behavior and key antecedents and outcomes of networking. Next, I discuss five major areas of future research for scholars to pursue. These directions include examining networking and leadership development, networking and the use of social media, networking and barriers for women and minorities, networking and the development of high quality relationships, and research on the "dark side" of networking. Numerous, exciting opportunities exist for researchers in this evolving field.

Keywords: networking, careers, social media, leadership

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Networking continues to be a critical career strategy for individuals (Forret, 2014) and executives and entrepreneurs are increasingly looking to networking as they consider how to garner the financial resources and needed expertise to launch their new ventures. My own interest in networking evolved from my personal experience in my doctoral program and my enthusiasm for the research on mentoring relationships which grew dramatically after the publication of Kathy Kram's (1985) important book on mentoring relationships in the workplace. While scholarly articles on mentoring proliferated, as a doctoral student in the early 1990s I noticed a plethora of popular press articles on the importance of networking but very few academic studies. Besides general networking advice, these articles often contained specific advice for women such as learning to play golf to help them break into male-dominated social groups in organizations.

The lack of scholarly research on networking behavior drew my interest and I have spent the majority of my career thinking and writing in this area. I believe that networking is as important today, if not more so, in light of advances in technology and the ability of individuals to connect with others across the globe via access to the internet. The multiple sub-themes of this conference provide further evidence for the growing interest in exploring the networking phenomenon. Here, I will briefly review some key areas of the networking literature and then progress to discussing five major areas in which further research would be fruitful, recognizing that the need for more scholarship in this field is vast and it provides a wide canvas for scholars to make their mark.

Networking behavior is defined as "individuals' attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career (Forret & Dougherty, 2001, p. 284). An important component of this definition is the idea of potential. While individuals may develop and maintain relationships with others, such relationships may not provide instrumental job or career assistance (whether or not such assistance is requested). Also, while individuals may commonly engage in networking for personal, non-work or career-related reasons (to obtain referrals for instance), the emphasis in the networking literature has been on networking for work or career purposes. Furthermore, although the definition above states that networking involves both developing and maintaining relationships, the level of effort needed to do so should not be underestimated. Networking effectively can take a great deal of time, energy, and resources as individuals invest in their professional development.

Forret and Dougherty (2001) described five types of networking behaviors including maintaining contacts, increasing internal visibility, socializing, engaging in professional activities, and participating in church and community. Others (e.g., Michael &Yukl, 1993; Wolff & Moser, 2006) have focused on networking both within and outside one's organization. Wolff and Moser (2006) and Wolff, Schneider-Rahm, and Forret (2011) have measured components of networking behavior to include building, maintaining, and using contacts

within and outside an individual's employing organization. Networking behavior can serve a boundary spanning function whereby individuals can develop relationships with those they may not normally come into contact with on a day-to-day basis.

Early research by Granovetter (1973) focused on developing weak ties, that is, acquaintances with others. Because our acquaintances do not tend to associate closely with one another, they are sources of unique information such as job leads. Similarly, Burt (1992) emphasized developing nonredundant contacts (i.e., those who do not know one another) in order to obtain unique informational benefits. Individuals can also serve a bridge function by introducing those contacts to one another. Given the varied resources and expertise held by individuals, Forret and Sullivan (2002) emphasized being strategic in one's networking behavior, and attempting to develop relationships within an individual's organization, profession, and local community in order to capitalize on the distinctive resources that individuals in those three domains may be able to supply.

Much of the research on networking behavior examined characteristics of those most likely to participate in networking. Not surprisingly, given its focus on individuals who gain their energy from interacting with others (McCrae & Costa, 1987), extraversion has been found to be the most consistent predictor of networking behavior (Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Van Hoye, Van Hooft, &Lievens, 2009; Wanberg, Kanfer, &Banas, 2000; Wolff & Moser, 2006). In addition, personal characteristics such as self-esteem (Forret & Dougherty, 2001) and proactive personality (Thompson, 2005) have been shown to predict networking. Individuals higher in self-esteem and proactive personality shouldfeel more confident about approaching others to develop relationships as well as believe that they have something of value to offer their exchange partners.

Other characteristics of those who participate in networking tend to pertain to the job or organizational level held by employees. For instance, those holding sales or marketing jobs are more likely to participate in networking behavior (Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Michael &Yukl, 1993) to help develop their client base and make their sales. Similarly, those at higher organizational levels (Carroll &Teo, 1996; Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Michael &Yukl, 1993, Wolff & Moser, 2006) participate in networking more as their position requires greater boundary spanning both within their organizations as they deal with managers across departmental or functional lines and outside their organizations as they are involved with a wider variety of constituents (e.g., clients, suppliers, joint venture partners, legislators, donors, etc.).

In addition, networking scholars have explored the resultant job and career outcomes for individuals. For example, a 2007 Hudson survey of workers and managers cited networking as the most common method used to obtain their current jobs, and Van Hoye et al. (2009) found that time spent networking was positively related to number of job offers. Wolff and Moser (2010) found that both internal and external networking behavior were related to changing employers. Networking within one's organization has also been found to be

related to advancement (Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Michael &Yukl, 1993; Wolff & Moser, 2010). Moreover, networking behavior has been positively associated with higher compensation (Blickle et al., 2012; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Wolff & Moser, 2009), job performance (Blickle et al., 2012; Thompson, 2005), and career satisfaction measures (Forret & Dougherty 2004; Wolff & Moser, 2009). Furthermore, McCallum, Forret, and Wolff (2014) found that internal networking behavior was positively related to both affective and normative organizational commitment while external networking behavior was negatively related to normative commitment.Overall, findings show that networking contributes substantially to job and career success measures.

While research on networking has been progressing at a rapid pace, and a myriad of opportunities exist for scholars interested in studying networking behavior, here, I outline five areas in particular that I see worthy of research attention. These five areas pertain to (a) networking and leadership development, (b) networking and the use of social media, (c) networking and barriers for women and minorities, (d) networking and the development of high quality relationships, and (e) research examining the "dark side" of networking.

First, although networking has long been recognized as instrumental to a manager's ability to get things done (Kotter, 1982) and has been shown to be related to a manager's success (Luthans, Hodgetts, &Rosenkrantz, 1988), relatively little research has examined networking as a tool for leadership development. In his taxonomy of leadership behaviors, Yukl (2012) described networking as a component of external behavior as leaders attempt to build relationships with members inside as well as outside their organization. However, few studies have examined specifically how networking can improve one's leadership abilities.

In our recent qualitative research, McCallum-Ferguson and Forret (in press) asked 335 middle to upper level managers how important networking was to their leadership development and to list the ways that networking helped them develop their abilities as a leader. Networking was reported as very important to their leadership development. Furthermore, coding of the qualitative responses indicated that networking was most helpful for obtaining information and ideas (43%), gaining work-related assistance to solve problems (17%), helping them with skill development (10%), advancing their careers through better visibility and new positions (9%), obtaining social support (8%), broadening their social networks through increasing contacts (7%) and receiving coaching from others (6%). Although networking can assist employees in so many ways, it is unfortunate that networking does not yet appear to be a strategic objective of most training and development efforts in organizations.

Second, with the advent of social media, much more research needs to examine the usage and effectiveness of networking via social media platforms. Research conducted on networking behavior has focused on networking in a traditional face-to-face communication channel. Organizations are commonly using social networks to advertise job openings, and CareerBuilder (2016) reported that 60% of organizations use

social networking platforms to research job applicants. Moreover, Jobvite (2012) estimated that 88% of job applicants use social media sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook to obtain information from friends and colleagues as they search for jobs.

However, little is known about the effectiveness of such social media sites for job seekers. Sullivan, Forret, and Samtani (2014) found that those receiving more assistance from social media contacts had a significantly greater number of job interviews, but there was no relationship between assistance from social media contacts and number of job offers received. This suggests that while networking on social media can help an individual get the proverbial "foot in the door," other factors such as specialized skills or abilities may lead to job offers. In addition, Sullivan et al. (2014) found the employed job seekers used social media less often than the unemployed job seekers for their job search, perhaps due to concerns that their employer might discover they were considering leaving. These results highlight a risk for job seekers in networking via social media which need to be taken into account during the job search process.

Furthermore, although networking online is commonly thought of as beneficial for job search success, there are a multitude of other, more immediate, benefits of networking behavior. Forret and Dougherty (1997) developed a scale of networking benefits which included receiving work-related assistance, career sponsorship, social support, job search assistance, business assistance, protection and political guidance, and information and ideas. In a survey of working professionals where they were asked to consider the social networking site (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook) used most often for their professional networking and to indicate benefits received from their contacts on the site, Davis, Wolff, Forret, and Sullivan (2017) found the frequency of usage of social networking sites was significantly related to all of the networking benefits with the exception of social support. Also, having a greater number of contacts on the social media platform was only marginally related in a positive direction with all of the networking benefits except for social support and protection and political guidance. These results imply that simply having a larger social network is insufficient for gaining substantial benefits and individuals need to be actively engaging in discussions with their contacts. Furthermore, it appears that face-to-face contact is needed for the receipt of social support.

Third, more research is needed as to why women and minorities benefit less from their networking efforts and what changes can occur to reverse this long-standing trend. Forret and Dougherty (2004) found that networking behavior (specifically increasing internal contacts) was positively related to number of promotions and total compensation for men but not for women. In an attempt to determine if stereotypes might be one explanation for the lack of success of women in obtaining objective career outcomes, Wingender, Bendella, and Forret (2017) designed an experimental study. They distributed one of three different surveys with several descriptive terms on it to a sample of working graduate students. Depending on the survey received, the respondentrated each descriptive term as to whether it was (a) characteristic of a successful networker in

general, or (b) characteristic of men in general or (c) characteristic of women in general. It was hypothesized that perhaps one reason women are less successful in their networking attempts is that the stereotype of a successful networker is more closely aligned with characteristics attributed to men. Results were not supported; the characteristics ascribed to a successful networker were not gender-based. However, more experimental studies may give rise to an understanding of potential unconscious biases that interfere with networking.

The social networks of women and minorities are one explanation for the low numbers of women and minorities in upper level positions (Forret, 2006). If women and minorities are clustered in traditional staff departments, characterized by low power and influence, and not in line positions where they have opportunities to directly impact the profit and loss of organizations, their accomplishments are unlikely to be taken as seriously contributing to the organization. Others holding line positions will receive more attention when it comes time to promotion (Wellington, Kropf, & Gerkovich, 2003). Furthermore, being in a position of low authority makes it much less likely that women and minorities will have the opportunity to develop relationships with more powerful individuals who could become influential sponsors for them within the organization (Pfeffer, 2013).

While organizations have been offering internal affinity groups such as women's networks or network groups for particular minorities, the effectiveness of these groups has been questioned. While such affinity groups do bring individuals sharing common demographic and other traits together, this may provide individuals with additional social support but are unlikely to help them develop relationships with more influential majority group members. Gee (2017) reports that companies are now looking to open affinity groups to all employees in an attempt to gain more involvement of majority members in efforts to support the advancement of women and minorities. Given the tendency of individuals to associate with those like themselves (Byrne, 1971), and the potential risks that upper level executives may feel from mentoring women or minorities such as concerns of gossip about a sexual relationship (Kram, 1985)or the increased visibility of failures by women and minorities (Kanter, 1977), more research needs to be done to examine ways in which interactions between majority group members with women and minorities can become more natural so they can find common interests and increased ease of communication.

Fourth, although research has measured the frequency and targets of networking efforts (Michael &Yukl, 1993; Wolff & Moser, 2006), more focus on the "quality" of networking behavior is needed. While Ferris et al. (2005) have developed a measure of an individual's networking ability, knowledge of what facilitates the development of high quality networking relationships would be useful. For instance, Hager, Forret, Wolff, and Sullivan (2015) examined social skills as a moderator of the relationships between networking behavior and number of promotions, job satisfaction, and career satisfaction. They hypothesized that those who participated in more networking behavior and who had better social skills would benefit the

most from their networking. While social skills was a significant predictor of networking behavior, accounting for variance above and beyond the effects of extraversion, none of the proposed moderating hypotheses were supported. Instead, social skills did moderate the relationship between networking behavior and both job and career satisfaction, but in the opposite direction predicted. While social skills did not make a difference in job or career satisfaction for those engaging in higher levels of networking behavior, having better social skills appeared to compensate for those low in networking behavior. Both job and career satisfaction was significantly higher for those with better social skills who participated in low levels of networking behavior.More research examining the quality of networking behavior, as well as factors that may serve as a substitute for networking, would be enlightening.

Fifth, research is needed to explore the "dark side" of networking behavior (Wolff, Moser, &Grau, 2008). By dark side, I refer to unintended negative consequences of participating in networking behavior. For instance, Wolff and Kim (2012) found those who participated in more networking experienced an increase in work-family conflict. This is consistent with Forret and Dougherty (2001) who showed that those who participated in more networking behavior were also likely to report working a higher number of hours per week. Hence, networking may have an unintended negative impact on one's life outside work.Networking behavior may also give rise to perceptions of favoritism by coworkers and subordinates, especially if it is felt that an individual was offered a job or promotion by virtue of "who you know, rather than what you know." Nepotism enhances feelings of unfairness by coworkers, and organizational cultures where positions appear to be offered based on political behavior are characterized by low morale and employee engagement (Van Hooft& Stout, 2012). Scholars should also examine whether coworkers try to undermine those they feel were hired or promoted unfairly, as well as the consequences experienced when the person obtaining the position,presumably due to his or her contacts,is lacking the skills and abilities needed to perform successfully.

Moreover, research is needed to explore how failure to engage in appropriate networking behavior can damage relationships. For example, when someone who engages in networking does not follow through on promises made (e.g., not getting back to the individual who offered assistance), worse relationships may be the result. By failing to follow the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), those networking may irreparably damage relationships with individuals who will no longer help them in the future. Furthermore, some individuals who believe they are participating in a networking opportunity may find themselves the subjects of abusive behavior. As recently reported widely in the media, the well-known Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, under the guise of promoting the careers of female actresses, would invite them to his hotel room and proceed to solicit unwanted sexual favors (Kantor &Twohey, 2017). Overall, those who want to participate in networking behavior need to be aware of potential unanticipated downsides.

In sum, networking is more relevant now than ever for the careers of individuals, entrepreneurs, and managers in today's global economy. Advances in technology have opened up unlimited opportunities to connect with individuals around the world, allowing people to connect with others who have similar interests or needed expertise or resources. How such relationships are nurtured is important to reach their full potential. As suggested here, as well as in the multiple sub-themes of this conference, myriad opportunities abound for scholars in this exciting and evolving field.

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