

Diversity & The Bar

Diversity Power Circles for Minority Lawyers

By Laurie N. Robinson

"It's not what you know; it's who you know." This phrase is never more appropriate than when it comes to finding the right job. Employment experts estimate that nearly 70 percent of all jobs are found through networking. For professional positions, that number is even higher. And getting the best job isn't the only benefit to networking. Ron Burt, a professor at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, found that those who are well connected have a hand in and exercise control over more rewarding opportunities, are paid better and promoted faster, move information faster and to more people, are more responsive, use less time and energy to get good results, and can tailor solutions instead of relying on one-size-fits-all answers to challenges.

Unfortunately, when it comes to people of color, research indicates that networking is underutilized. According to Margaret Simms, vice president of programs at the Joint Center for Political Studies and economist for Black Enterprise magazine, African Americans remain unemployed longer than whites with similar credentials.

Simms associates this disparity with African-Americans' inability to leverage personal contacts. Simms states, "African Americans tend to look for jobs in different ways than other groups do. This situation occurs because many get their jobs through personal contact, and African Americans may not be able to utilize those kinds of connections as much as whites."[1](#)

Further research conducted by Catalyst, a nonprofit research and advisory organization working to advance women in business, found that of the African-American, Asian, and Latino women it surveyed regarding career advancement, the lack of effective professional relationships was cited as a barrier.

So how can you, as a diverse attorney committed to career success, build the best network to serve your goals? Ivan Misner, founder and CEO of Business Network International and the developer of more than 3,000 networking groups in 16 countries around the world, suggests building a diverse network of contacts that include people who "don't look like you, sound like you, speak like you, or have your background, education, or history."[2](#)

Misner observes that the strongest networking groups are ones that are "diverse in many, many ways."[3](#) This diverse personal network increases the possibility of including connectors, or linchpins-people who in some way cross over between two or more clusters or groups of individuals, and have overlapping interests and contacts that allow them to link groups of people together easily.

Do You Need to Diversify Your Current Network?

To assess whether you need to diversify your current network, answer the following questions:

1. Do you belong to at least three organizations or participate in any activities that are totally unrelated to your profession?
2. Do you know at least 25 professionals (each) in at least four separate industries unrelated to your profession?

3. Do you belong to at least three organizations that consist of a majority of people outside of your race?
4. Do you belong to at least two organizations that consist of a majority of people of different socioeconomic backgrounds?
5. Do you belong to at least two organizations that consist of a majority of people who are outside your age range?

If you answered "no" to any of the five questions, then there is a strong probability that you need to diversify your circle. Getting Started: Ways to Expand Your Network

Start on Your Job

One of the best places to network is on the job. Connecting with those with whom you work will provide an assortment of contacts within your company.

Build a Rapport with Your Colleagues. First, start with your colleagues. To get the ball rolling, you can start by inviting your coworker(s) to lunch. This interaction will open the lines of communication. During this process, you should actively listen to find out the common interests that you share and build from there. To break the ice, Debra Langford, director of strategic sourcing, worldwide recruitment and executive search at TimeWarner, recommends that you find a topic that would create an informal dialogue. According to Langford, you can learn a lot about your colleagues by simply asking casual questions that can give you great insight, such as "What is your favorite movie?" In the end, building a rapport and comradeship with the people with whom you spend 40-plus hours a week will help to build mutual trust. It will further facilitate collaboration and sharing of information about what is going on in the department.

Reach Out to the Support Staff. Many people make the mistake of devaluing the importance of subordinates, particularly administrative employees. G. Arlivia Babbage Gamble, a successful executive at State Farm Insurance, highly recommends building alliances with subordinates. This is because often it is these individuals who are the real gatekeepers of information, as they are the ones who open and read all mail, schedule the meetings for and with top executives, and are privy to important dialogue taking place at meetings where decisions are made. Gamble said that getting to know her subordinates gave her "inside intelligence" and protected her from things that she was not aware of. In the end, when it comes to corporate upheaval or decisions that will impact you, put yourself in a position where you are not the last to know.

Meet Different People Outside Your Department. While networking on your job, you should strive to meet people outside of your group and section. For example, if you work in the litigation group of your company's legal department, seek to network with people in other practice areas such as labor, intellectual property, corporate, or tax. Learning about different areas of law will help to stimulate your brain and will give you an overview of the issues affecting your entire legal department. You should also go a step further by venturing out to meet individuals who work in departments wholly unrelated to law. For example, actively strive to mingle with individuals in the marketing, human resources, communications, and sales departments. Not only will this help to broaden your knowledge of the company's business operations, but it will also expose you to new people with whom you normally may not come in contact.

Educate Yourself About Your Company's Top Executives. Take time to learn about the top executives at your company. There is nothing more embarrassing than being at a company meeting or event and asking the chief executive officer her name. You should review photographs of the CEO, department heads, and division heads. Such information can usually be found on the Internet, in trade publications, or in the annual report or company directory. Having this information will allow you impromptu opportunities to network with top brass in unusual places (for example, the elevator, the hallway, and company meetings).

Get on the Radar Screen

Donna Fisher and Sandy Vilas, co-authors of *Power Networking: 59 Secrets for Personal and Professional Help*, recommend that you work to increase your visibility both inside and outside your office.

At work, strive to get involved in assignments that are critical to the company or high-profile. While landing such assignments is more easily said than done, you should never say no to projects, and should take advantage of every opportunity, as small cases can turn into big cases. In effect, working on visible assignments will provide you with an opportunity to interact with individuals who are higher up in the company. And it will allow your talents and skills to be showcased. Ultimately, this increased visibility can help open doors to new opportunities, as well as enhance career development and advancement.

Outside of the workplace, you can increase your visibility by serving on a committee or board of an organization. Fischer and Vilas state that as a committee or board member, you create more visibility for yourself while gaining new stature as a participant, contributor, and leader. You will be known as a giver, not just a taker. You will broaden your own horizons and expand your experience as a leader and networker. Fisher and Vilas state that volunteering for a leadership position provides a solid foundation for power networking.

Other mechanisms to increase visibility include writing articles for association newsletters, magazines, and newspapers, and serving as a panelist at an organizational meeting, conference, or seminar.

Overall, the right level of exposure will provide others with a chance to learn who you are and view you as a key player.

Network in Places Where You Are In the "Minority"

Another way to diversify your network is to participate in events where you are in the minority. As previously stated, homogenous interactions limit the flow of information. If you are a part of the majority within your organization or with respect to the events you attend (for example, everyone is in your race, age, profession, and has your level of experience), you should think about attending events or participating in organizations where people like you are outnumbered. By doing so, you will find that a whole new world of information and resources will open to you. Others will also benefit from your involvement as you provide them with new points of view. Ultimately, stepping outside of your comfort zone will take you to another dimension.

Maximizing the Overall Effectiveness of Your Network

Manage Your New Relationships: Once you get your network up and running, you may find it challenging to manage all of the new relationships. Organization is crucial. Based on your present goals, you should organize your contacts in the order of importance. Melissa Giovagnoli, co-author of *Networkling: Building Relationships and Opportunities for Success*, suggests organizing your list of contacts in a multilevel group (primary, secondary, and tertiary) according to the frequency of contact, level of exchange, alignment with your goals and values, and type of opportunities developed. The primary group should consist of no more than 10 regular active contacts, while the secondary and tertiary groups should consist of those who lend occasional support to you from time to time. By prioritizing your contacts in this manner, it will enable you to manage your time and energy wisely.

Cultivate Relationships: Cultivating relationships is the most important aspect of networking, and one that many people unfortunately fail to master. In a culture where everyone is looking for instantaneous results,

people ineffectively network, because they do not put in the necessary time, energy, or effort to nurture relationships. Remember that the earth was not made in one day, but seven (including the day of rest). Establishing a network is the same way. It is a process that takes time to develop. Surely, it will take patience and persistence to establish a rapport with others.

One way to cultivate a relationship is by staying in contact with the people you meet. Fisher and Vilas observe that staying in touch with people will keep your network alive and well. They suggest that this connection can be accomplished in the form of notes, cards, calls, gifts, and visits. These gestures provide personal touches that represent care, thoughtfulness, and sincerity.

In addition, Fisher and Vilas recommend that you develop the habit of nurturing your network in the following ways:

- Every week, call at least one person with whom you have not talked in at least 90 days to reactivate your "hidden network."⁵
- Send a gift or note as soon as possible when another person has served or supported you in some way.
- Invite people in your network to events that you have organized if the event would be of interest or value to them.
- Send clippings and articles from papers or magazines. When someone you know is in the paper, send her a copy of the article and a congratulatory note. When you see an article that relates to someone's business, industry, or personal projection, send it to him with a short note.

Give and It Shall Be Given Unto You: Networking does not simply consist of asking random people for a job or calling on people when you are in desperate need of help. Instead, it entails team building, giving and sharing, and helping others achieve their goals. In essence, the whole point of networking is to develop meaningful, win-win relationships. Unfortunately, people make the mistake of thinking of networking in terms of "What's in it for me and what can I get out of [this] situation?"⁶ explains Joe Watson, CEO and owner of StrategicHire, an executive search firm in Reston, Virginia. This way of thinking, of course, is the wrong approach. Watson points out that, "The smartest people understand that networking is really about doing for other people and that in doing for other people, conversely they will want to help you."⁷

To develop an effective network, you should take the sole focus off of yourself and put it on helping others achieve their goals. When you meet someone new, gather information on how you can help them, whom they would like to meet, and what information or resources you have that you can provide. Your goal should be to share ideas, information, and other resources. For instance, if someone shares his goal of meeting people within a certain industry, you can assist that person by recommending a resource such as a web site, conference, or organization. Furthermore, you can use your personal contacts to connect them directly with others who can help them. Not only will you find helping others to accomplish their goals to be personally rewarding, but also in the end, you will be able to foster a mutual give-and-take relationship with them. Ultimately, this help will result in a positive cycle of reciprocations.

Always be ready, willing, and able to support others.

Diversify Your Reading Materials: As your network expands, it is likely that your new contacts will work in varied professions and will be from different echelons. To stay on track, you should diversify your reading materials. Do not limit your reading to just information that pertains specifically to you, your community, your industry, or area of specialty. Instead, stay well versed on different subject matters. One of the ways that Langford is able to effectively manage her multiple contacts is by reading every section of the newspaper, as well as supplementing her reading with business, trade, and entertainment publications. Langford firmly

believes that varied reading materials help to broaden her knowledge base to converse with anyone about anything, and gives her the versatility to make connections.

At the end of the day, remember: Information is power, and power comes through networking.

Building your network isn't an activity that's limited to a job search. An effective network not only helps you find the right job, but also to succeed in it. Each day, do something to further your circle of contacts, and you'll soon have a strong, solid base of supporters in your corner.

Laurie N. Robinson is the assistant general counsel in the labor and employment group at CBS Broadcasting Inc. in New York City.

Corporate Counsel Women of ColorSM The author of this article is Laurie N. Robinson, who is the assistant general counsel in the labor and employment group at CBS Broadcasting Inc. in New York City. Robinson recently founded a not-for-profit networking organization called Corporate Counsel Women of ColorSM. The organization consists of nearly 600 women attorneys of color who serve as general counsel, assistant general counsel, corporate counsel, and in-house legal counsel for Fortune 1000 companies, Forbes 2000 companies, non-profit corporations, and other entities in the United States, as well as in Canada, Asia, and Europe. Corporate Counsel Women of Color was formed to provide a support network to in-house women attorneys of color and to promote the national and international advancement of women of color in the legal profession and workplace. MCCA[®] is helping the author of this article to spread word about the organization, so if you'd like more information, please visit the web site at www.ccwomenofcolor.org.

NOTES

1. Cliff Hocker, Blacks stay unemployed longer. Black Enterprise (February 1994).
2. Ivan Misner, The importance of diversity in networking. Entrepreneur.com, <http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,313946,00.html>.
3. Ivan Misner, Branch out and grow. Business Network International, http://www.bni.com/successnet/Mar_April2004/huddle.shtml.
4. Maureen Jenkins, Getting the corner office, Black Enterprise (August 2004).
5. Donna Fisher and Sandy Vilas, Power Networking: 59 Secrets for Personal and Professional Help (Second Edition).
6. Lee Anna Jackson, Networking skills that promise success. Black Enterprise (February 2004).
7. Id.

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