

Networking: Helping women find empowerment and equality in the workplace

Republished from *Pennsylvania Business Central - Women in Business* - February/March 2018



Cheryl Hyatt

In today's competitive job market, starting your career or moving it forward can seem almost impossible. Often, knowing someone at the right time is just as important as your education and experience. But what if you aren't a natural-born networker? Cheryl Hyatt from Hyatt-Fennell offers her advice for broadening your contact community.

Q: What do you do in your role at Hyatt-Fennell?

A: I am one of the founders. I am the CEO and partner of Hyatt-Fennell; we are an executive search firm. Our role is to work with clients, mainly higher education institutions, to find people to fill leadership positions. We have looked for positions like faculty before, but our main positions to fill are deans, all the way up to presidents and board members.

Q: How does networking play into female career development and moving up into high-level positions?

A: First, I believe that individuals need to have a wide network of people they can call upon when different things occur in their career. When you're looking for a career change and you have a wider network beyond your small group, or institution or organization, you have the ability to reach out to people in your network and ask questions like, "Tell me a little bit about the place. What's the attitude on campus?" or "What's the attitude at the organization itself?" When securing a job it's critical to make sure it's the right move professionally and the right fit culturally.

Q: Are there serious drawback for people who aren't naturally inclined to networking, such as introverts, and who don't make an effort to network?

A: I think it depends on the type of organization and type of career path they're on. I think most people are a bit of an introvert, but they have to make an effort to be able to get

out there and be a little more extraverted. I think they'd be amazed at how quickly their network expands once they start meeting people within their organization or attending conferences and other functions.

Q: Would you say that networking isn't as difficult as some people make it out to be?

A: I would. I always suggest when people tell me, "Uh, I can't do that," to take a friend or a colleague or someone from a sister organization with them to network at these events, so they have someone to support them.

Q: What tips do you have for young businesswomen who are just starting out, on how to build their network?

A: When you use the term "young" I think of young in chronological age and also of young in their particular career. People change their careers often within a lifetime, and, if it is completely different, you need to create a new network. That doesn't mean you forget your old network, but that you grow it. For those individuals who are young in age, it's important for them to attend as many business-related functions as they can for two reasons: professional growth and a chance to network outside their specific field. Professional growth is really important, and you need to continue to grow; you won't progress if you're not continually learning about your particular career path. As for networking outside your particular field, I think you'd be surprised at how many people are already in your network when you are just starting out, so think about those people. Reach out to someone who might be a mentor and ask, "Who can you connect to me, and how I can help you?"

Q: What are the benefits for someone who is more advanced in their career to be a mentor for someone just starting out?

A: We learn in many different ways and being a mentor teaches us about leadership, new skills and patience. It also helps build your network. As a mentor, your mentee has

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others in their network who can help grow your network. Helping each other is really important. And sometimes, you learn from people who are good at what they do, but you also learn from people who are not good at what they do. Having a wider breadth of individuals in your network can help you learn both how to do things and how not to do them.

Q: Are there any resources you can recommend to help businesspeople in this particular region network?

A: Chambers have some great networking events in the local area. Typically, there are professional organizations affiliated with most careers, and once a person looks at their specific career, they should go out and find those organizations and attend different functions they might have, whether it's an evening meeting or a luncheon... Also, go online. LinkedIn is a great resource for professionals where you can find discussion boards and participate in the conversation, or you could try writing a blog. Suddenly your name gets out there, people start responding to you, and you're growing your network. It might not be personal face-to-face, but you now have another contact, somebody who reached out and you begin to have that conversation online. It's another way to grow.

Q: Do you find that women are at a particular advantage or disadvantage in any way when it comes to networking?

A: I do. I personally think women have to try a little harder. I think sometimes it's more difficult because women tend not to share as much; they're worried about over-stepping, and don't tend to get out as much, and I mention these for two reasons. I think it's by nature, but I also think at times there are so many other factors weighing in on a person's life. It does not necessarily depend on gender, but there are so many things within a person's life nowadays; your career and your personal life really become one. It's not one or the other. You're living it full-time, both professionally as well as personally. I think women tend to have a more difficult time off the clock, with being able to say, "Well I'm going to go this networking event" or "I need to sit down and take a look what's going on online."

Q: Can attending these events and taking more opportunities to network help women overcome some of the gender-bias in their career fields?

A: I think that women have to. As women we have to extend ourselves, and sometimes it's more difficult, but once we do, we feel good about not only our professional career and how it's growing, but about ourselves and how we continue to grow personally.

Q: And do you think that now particularly is a really crucial time for female businesspeople to connect with one another and provide support within a female sphere?

A: I do. As women, we tend to want to nurture, so it's important to continue to do that because it shows our human side, and by doing so, we end up getting more people within our network. We continue to grow our network because we tend to open up a little bit more, and I think we need to be able to open up, and we need to help others. That's critical, regardless of gender. No matter who you are, as you continue to grow within your organization, everyone should work to get others on board and help others with their continued growth. I think it's the only way organizations, companies and our world will continue to grow both professionally and personally.

Q: Do you have any last tips regarding networking?

A: I think women need to make a special effort to do this. I don't care at what stage you are within your career. I think that continuing to network and grow within your profession brings a person much more joy in life. And I think it makes them much happier, personally. It's all connected. If you can do one, it adds to the other.

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