# Teaching Networking Skills to Students

Monica J. Favia, Ph.D.
Commonwealth University

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that networking skills contribute to higher compensation and greater levels of job satisfaction. Much of the extent research demonstrates that networking skills are a necessity in today's business environment. At the same time, many professionals express an extreme dislike for networking and for Gen Z this appears to be a source of great discomfort and dread. This paper describes a class project that represents a first step in providing students with networking experience.

Keywords: Networking, LinkedIn, Sales skills, Interpersonal skills, Experiential learning,
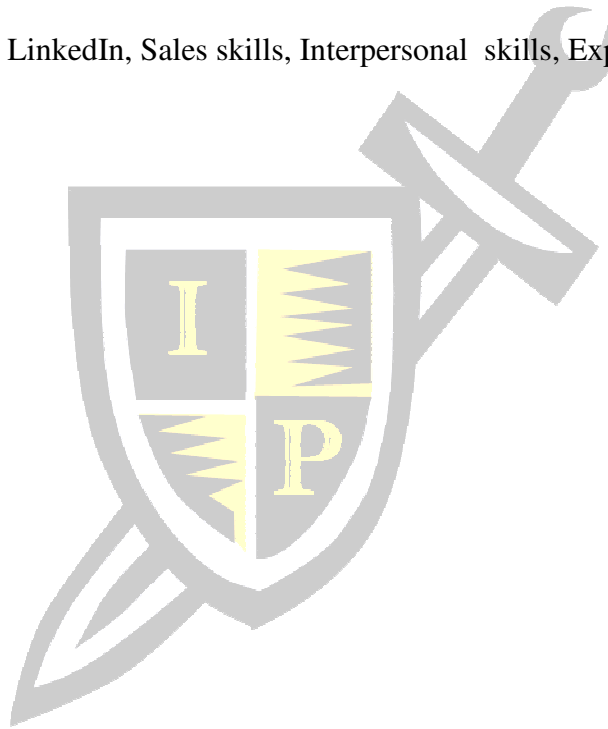
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Networking is viewed with dread by many professionals and for college students not only simple dread but frequently with fear as well. Dan Carson (2019) in *Industrial Management* quoted journalist Shannon Molloy who wrote, "Technological advances has (have) made verbal communication redundant…young people aren't used to speaking to someone in person or on the phone, and the thought of doing so terrifies them," (p. 6). A survey conducted by One Poll found that "65 percent of American millennials do not feel comfortable engaging someone face-to-face, (Carson, 2019, p. 6). There is little research in this area, but anecdotal information indicates that this is even more so the case for Gen Z. According to career coach Emily Rezkalla, quoted online in *Insider* "They went through Covid during some of their prime years of career searching and it makes it difficult for them to practice those networking skills," (Dawkins, 2022). Emily Rezkalla also asserted that "Gen Z has difficulty navigating LinkedIn because it's not as refined as other social media platform," (Dawkins, 2022). Yet at the same time a large amount of research tells us that in today's business environment networking is a necessity (Wolff and Moser, 2009; Forrett and Dougherty, 2004). This is particularly the case for sales professionals. Success for sales professionals frequently depends on effective networking. However, Gino, Kouchaki, and Casciaro (2015) found that for many networking makes them feel guilty, inauthentic and morally impure. According to Wolff and Moser (2009), networking is commonly defined as "behaviors that are aimed at building, maintaining and using informal relationships that possess the (potential) benefit of facilitating work-related activities of individuals by voluntarily gaining access to resources and maximizing common advantages," (pg. 196-197). Wolff and Moser (2009), found that networking contributed to higher compensation over time and that individuals who engaged in networking were more satisfied in their careers.

Given that networking offers clear advantages it is worth considering what are the characteristics of those who engage in networking and those who don't. Cao and Smith (2021) confirmed the correlation between high status individuals having broader networks than low-status individuals. In addition, high-status individuals were more likely to engage in networking behaviors, (Cao and Smith, 2021). Their findings demonstrated that high-status individuals believe that they have more value to offer whereas low-status individuals are less likely to perceive that they have value to offer (Cao and Smith, 2021). Cao and Smith (2021) defined status as "both the currency accumulated by those who receive deference from others and the lens through which others ascribe favorable views toward those with high status," (pg. 112-113). This is consistent with the findings of Gino, Kouchaki and Casciaro, (2016) who found that senior people were more likely to engage in networking than junior people. Senior people have more perceived power in the organization than junior people and are able to offer advice, and resources and therefore, find networking easier (Gino, Kouchaki and Casciaro, 2016). Finally, these studies support the anecdotal information discussed with the author by one corporate representative when asked what was one of the biggest challenges they faced with entry-level salespeople. The response was that entry-level salespeople were reluctant to approach prospects in the C-Suite. This particular corporation primarily sells to the C-Suite so this is a significant challenge and served as the motivation for the class project described here.

The challenge of motivating individuals to network is to change their perspective. Allen Cohen and David Bradford in their book, *Influence Without Authority* note that individuals often have more to offer of value than they may think. Frequently individuals focus on value looking

at things like money, social connections and technical know-how while ignoring less tangible items such as gratitude and recognition and intrinsic feelings of satisfaction from a positive interaction. According to Gino, Kouchaki and Casciaro (2016), those who engage as mentors enjoy being mentors more when they are thanked for their assistance and if that gratitude is expressed publicly, it can enhance the mentor's reputation. This interaction has value to the mentor who is often someone of higher status and more perceived power. This is consistent with the advice Cao and Smith (2021) offered in reframing networking advances to think about the value the individual brings to the potential relationship.

It is generally accepted that experiential learning is an important learning tool. According to Kolb (1984) experiential learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience"(p. 41). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model portrays two modes of gaining experience -- concrete experience and abstract conceptualization -- and two related modes of transforming experience – reflective observation and active experimentation. According to Kolb's (1984) four-stage learning cycle, experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are integrated and refined into abstract concepts from which new ideas for action can be drawn. These ideas can be tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences (Sternberg, and Zhang, 2001). Therefore, to teach a new skill. experiential learning tools are an effective means. This project requires students to engage in networking activities to learn how to network.

THE PROJECT

First Component of the Assignment

While the project is focused on teaching networking skills to sales students, the project can be used in any class. Students are first introduced to the project with a general discussion and lecture about the importance of networking and the value that they as students have to offer. They are asked what their experience has been with networking and what they have done. Most are of course, reluctant to engage in networking and when they do, they simply ask for the person's name and send out a LinkedIn connection request. A short lecture is given on how to improve networking taken largely from Gino, Kouchaki and Casciario's (2016) article "Learn to Love Networking." Paraphrased and condensed here:

1) Focus on Learning- Change your attitude to one focusing on the opportunities for discovery; the possibility of learning something new.
2) Identify Common Interests – Think about how you and the person you are meeting with may have commonalities. Regardless of our perceived status you may have something in common with that person, if nothing else, possibly the circumstance of meeting. Be open to explore. The best relationships are built on commonalities.
3) Think Broadly about What You can Give- Even if you perceive yourself to be lower-status than the person you are meeting with you have something of value to offer, perhaps the perspective of a different generation, new ideas, and never underestimate gratitude.
4) Find a Higher Purpose – Think beyond that one connection to the network, and how the entirety of the network can not only help the individual but others as well (Gino, Kouchaki, and Casciario, 2016).

The first deliverable of the assignment is developing their LinkedIn page. For the purposes of the assignment five main elements are considered the profile picture, the background picture, the headline, the summary including education and relevant skills.

The first point that is emphasized is that their LinkedIn page is the building of their personal brand. According to LinkedIn, the profile picture is important and the first item of consideration. The picture should be a head shot with only the individual in the picture. Professional dress is desirable and the photo's background should reflect the brand they wish to project. Next is the consideration of the background picture. At this point in their careers, the background photo should reflect the student's interests and personal brand. Next the headline should be descriptive of their personal brand and memorable. In other words, more than simply student at X University. The summary should be the student's personal story that reflects the brand they wish to establish. The student should list the skills that reflect not only their brand, but the skills that employers in their desired career would find desirable. Finally, students are told that when requesting a connection, it is desirable to include a message referring to where and how they met.

Second Component of the Assignment

The instructor is required to identify a networking event on campus, this could be a career fair, an alumni networking event, a conference, or any other type of event that the university has. Students are required to attend the event and given a goal of a specific number of connections to make. But the goal is larger they must not only request the connections they must give the instructor the response to a specific opening question. The question should be thought provoking, open, and focused on learning. One question that has received a good response is, "If you had to attribute your success to just one thing, what would that be?" The goal is to begin a conversation and the start of a potential relationship with the opportunity for the student to identify common interests. This question also assists in providing a positive intrinsic feeling of satisfaction in the potential connection's ability to provide advice to a young student. At the close of the conversation the student is required to ask for a business card or other identifying information in order to request a connection on LinkedIn. The deliverables are:

1. A print-out of their LinkedIn page/screen shot if uploaded into an LMS.
2. The quotes
3. Documentation of the request to connect on LinkedIn.

The instructor should consider the events(s) that are assigned. It is desirable to pick a friendly, supportive group, one that will provide a positive interaction. Alumni are generally helpful in student interactions and provide a supportive environment. Alumni networking events are probably the first choice for the exercise. Career fairs by their very nature also are supportive of these sorts of conversations. The goal is to have the exercise be a positive interaction so that the student's level of apprehension is decreased, their level of successful encounters is increased, and finally their confidence increased.

Evaluation of Assignment

How the instructor evaluates the project depends on the event chosen. If it is a large event more connections should be expected. A small event conversely would have an expectation of fewer connections. One possibility is:

LinkedIn Page, 15 quotes, and documentation of connection
requests – 50 pts
LinkedIn Page, 10 – 14 quotes, and documentation – 40 pts.
LinkedIn Page, 5 – 9 quotes, and documentation – 30 pts.
LinkedIn Page, 1-4 quotes, and documentation – 20 pts.
LinkedIn Page only - 10pts.

In this potential evaluation 50 pts. represents an "A." However, the instructor can choose to vary
the goals and weighting of the components.

CONCLUSION

This project is a first step in providing students with instruction and a positive experience
in networking. The project is also a first step in helping students overcome their trepidation about
networking and begin the professional network that will serve them well in the future.
Networking is a vital skill in today's business environment, and this is particularly the case for
professional salespeople.
Student reactions to this project have been largely positive with one student reporting that
their connection said that the question selected here differentiated them positively from every
other student at the event. In addition, the connections the students form as part of this project
have the potential to help them for years to come in their careers.
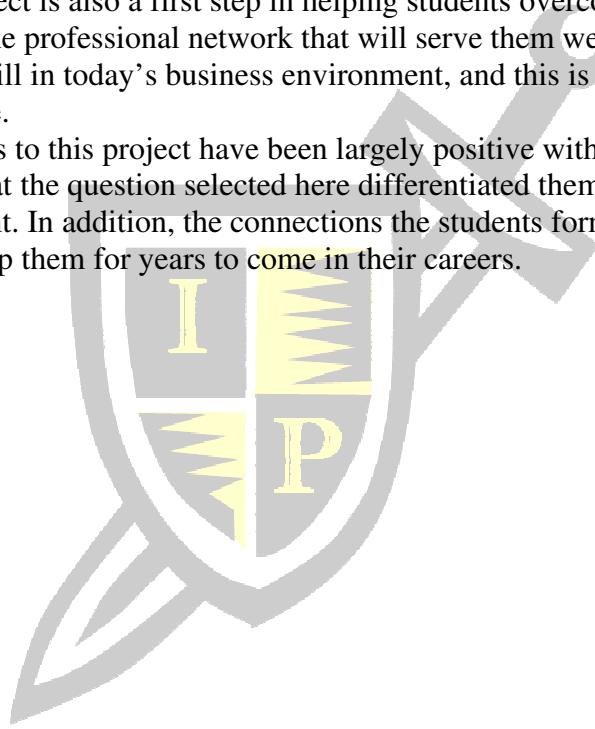
REFRENCES

Cao, J and Smith, E.B. (2021) Why do high status people have larger social networks? Belief in status-quality coupling as driver of network-broadening behavior and social network size. Organization Science, 32(1). 112-132.

Cao, J. and Smith (2021). Why are some people more reluctant to network than others? Kellogg Insight. Retrieved from: https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/network-size-social-status.

Carson, D. (Jan/Feb 2019). HR finds itself doubly challenged. Industrial Management, 61(1) p. 6. Retrieved from: https://www.proquest.com/docview/2186992928/fulltextPDF/17A99C9BD4494934PQ/1?accountid=26459.

Cohen, A.R. and Bradford, D.L. (2017). *Influence Without Authority,* New York: Wiley.

Dawkins, J.O. (Dec. 29, 2022) Gen Z lacks the communication and networking skills needed for the workforce. Companies need to train them. Insider, Retrieved from: https://www.businessinsider.com/gen-z-communication-and-networking-skills-work-2022-12.

Forest, M.L. and Doughtery, T.W.(2004). Networking behaviors and career outcomes: Differences for men and women? Journal of Organizational Behavior. 25, 419-437.

Gino, F., Casciaro, T, and Kouchaki, M.(2021). Dread networking? Here's how to make it feel less icky, Kellogg Insight. Retrieved from: https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/improve-networking-attitude.

Gino, F., Casciaro, T, and Kouchaki, M. (2020). Why connect? Moral consequences of networking with a promotion or prevention focus. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 119(6), 1221-1238.

Gino, F., Casciaro, T, and Kouchaki, M.(2016) Learn to love networking. Harvard Business Review, Retrieved from: https://hbr.org/2016/05/learn-to-love-networking.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). Experiential Learning: *Experience as the Source of Learning and Development.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Sternberg, R.J., & Zhang, L.-F. (Eds.). (2001). *Perspectives on Thinking, Learning, and Cognitive Styles* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Wolff, H. & Moser, K. (2009). Effects of Networking on Career Success; A longitudinal study. Journal of Applied Psychology, 94(1), 196-206.