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Psychologist-Entrepreneur: Dream to Reality

(Part 2: Building Networks)

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Contact networks: what are they?

A contact network is generally defined as a group of people whose mutual interaction helps its members to progress more quickly and more efficiently.

At one time or another, everyone has needed to tap into a network to obtain a reference for a good plumber or for the perfect baby-sitter. When faced with the task of finding a resource to fill a specific need, we would much rather choose one that has already passed the muster of other people than have to seek out and assess a large number of candidates by ourselves.

In these modern times, when knowledge doubles every year and a half, knowledge really is power. To keep our footing in the midst of change, we need access to accurate information, competent advice, and rock-solid support. Building a network of useful relationships helps us to maintain our balance and our perspective in a world of change. Both our personal and professional lives have much to gain and much to offer when we break out of our cocoon of solitude and individualism.

As is usually the case, it is best to have a good understanding of your own needs and objectives. This is the first step in applying the art of networking to your career-development objectives.

- *Where do you see yourself in five years?*
- *Whom will you be eating breakfast with?*
- *What will you wear to go to work?*
- *Who will help you achieve your goals?*

Networks can meet two types of objectives:

1. PRESERVATION OBJECTIVES:

These are objectives associated with maintaining the balance and stability in your life. Close friends and family members can play this role. But which ones? Whom do you turn to when you are sad, fed up, afraid or overcome with joy? Is it always the same person? That can be risky. Maybe you need to expand your network.

2. PROGRESS OBJECTIVES:

These are objectives that prompt you to accept new challenges, to develop your personal or professional talents. "Boosters" fulfill this role. There are four types.

MODELS: people who have qualities, abilities or styles that you admire. They have already partly influenced where you are and where you want to go.

MENTORS: people who share their knowledge and techniques with you. They are valued counsellors with whom you share a special bond. Studies indicate that successful people have on average three mentors during their careers.

"DEVIL'S ADVOCATES": While - luckily! - they are not of central importance, these individuals still play a useful role. Their porcupine pricks spur you on to give your best. They force you to reconsider your ideas and attitudes. Even though you may sometimes detest them, they stimulate your thinking, as long as you maintain an open mind!

Contacts at various levels: people you know, people who know you, people who talk about you, people who purchase your services. The essence of networking is interacting successfully with each of these types of contacts in an organized, purposeful manner. Becoming a network insider

Can everyone build a network? Theoretically, yes. Certain interpersonal skills can be valuable in this regard:

Be assertive. Overcome the fear of leaving your office, approaching people, taking risks, and asking for help.

Ask good questions. Find good sources of information. Start from the premise that you usually get what you ask for. Every time you meet someone, focus on a clear objective and orient your questions towards that goal.

Listen with your sixth sense; in other words, be attentive to the whole person, including verbal and non-verbal messages, as well as to the situation as a whole. By listening in this way (psychologists are masters of the art of listening, after all!) in a spirit of openness and approval, you can identify needs and subjects of mutual interest. Commonalities are the very fabric of interpersonal networks.

Present yourself positively. First impressions are lasting. Visual presentation counts for 90% of the total effect. All details of your appearance should be geared to the desired objectives: clothes, hair, accessories - and, naturally, an infectious smile and a business card to match!

Develop a reputation for knowledge and competence. Effective networkers stake out areas where they excel. This is an excellent way to join and profit from an existing network. Its members see your expertise as an asset.

Show an interest in others' development. People have their own personal likes and dislikes, and they are more inclined to help you when you help them to develop these

interests in a sincere and spontaneous way. Friendly relations far outweigh a cold calculation of someone's worth to you.

How do networks operate?

A typical adult knows between 500 and 1000 people socially. The world is made up of systems within systems, and, as everyone knows, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Each member of your network is an entry point to another network, so that your network is actually linked to an infinite number of other networks. Is it not astonishing that professional loners like ourselves could be connected to so many people?

The value of distant links

A number of sociologists have studied this phenomenon. They have discovered that remote acquaintances are more likely than family and friends to provide the direct information or recommendations needed to fully exploit an opportunity.

Acquaintances are people whose relationship with you involves only brief periods of time, intimacy and shared emotion. They are separated from you by at least two contacts or relationships.

If networks are such a great thing, why do so many psychologists live in lonely isolation, bereft of personal contact? Why are relationships between psychologists so often based on competition? The question of why psychologists (and all other human beings) behave as they do when space and wealth are unequally distributed or when there are shortages has many answers.

And modern society is beset by more problems than ever. Some of these problems are as old as history itself, but others are still not well understood, and psychologists as a profession have a valuable and competent role to play. The recent development of family mediation as a specialty is a good example.

The challenge of marketing yourself, therefore, is to determine the exact contribution you can make and the specific needs you are able to address in a way that is creative and unique. Once your identity is clearly established, your clientele can be built up by mining your contact networks.

How do you build a network?

Building a network takes time, energy and resources. The easiest way is to exploit existing networks by becoming active participants in them.

Networks of this kind, which are usually heterogeneous in nature, can be invaluable, stimulating and worthwhile, as long as you are patient, generous, open and well-organized. Chambers of commerce, social clubs, networks of business women are some examples that have proved their worth. Support, solidarity and even friendship can grow from carefully cultivated links, and these elements are as important as the visibility that is networks' primary benefit.

Homogeneous networks are also useful. By learning what your colleagues are up to and who can provide services that you don't offer, by discovering the interests of other local psychologists and establishing working relationships with them, and by doing favours without expecting something immediately in return, you can become a respected member of the profession and build a reputation as someone who is generous, reliable and competent - in short, the kind of professional likely to be hired when the need arises.

There is no conflict with being a professional who scrupulously adheres to a code of ethics as well as a business professional.

To sum up...

Exploiting the full business possibilities of a network requires special knowledge and strategies that must be systematically applied. More and more psychologists are starting to pay attention to this aspect of their practice and to acquire the tools they need to market themselves properly. They recognize that they are becoming entrepreneurs, but they are glad to be reaching a wider audience. Better access to psychological services is a matter of networking, too.

While contact networks are not a cure-all, it is only sensible to include them in your toolkit. There is no conflict with being a professional who scrupulously adheres to a code of ethics as well as a business professional.

Psychologists are not immune to the sweeping changes affecting the working world, and many of them have been forced to re-examine some of the "conventional wisdom" of the profession. In response to the crisis, it is likely that new ways of practising psychology and of earning an honest living will emerge.

References

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