Be a Useful Human

Idea In Short

Treat networking as people helping people. Start before you need anything, give value first, and nurture fewer high-quality connections rather than collecting contacts.

Humans Are Tribal

We are biologically wired for community and belonging. This instinct predates corporate life by hundreds of thousands of years. We seek connection not just for survival but for comfort and identity. As Yuval Noah Harari argues in Sapiens, cooperation among strangers built civilization itself. Fast forward to modern corporate life and the same principle holds. People buy from people, ask for referrals, and look for social proof. They are suspicious of those they do not know. Work is tribal, and life is tribal.

A strong professional network gives you privileged information, access, feedback, and support. It is common sense that surrounding yourself with smart, ambitious, generous people helps. As Jim Rohn famously said, "You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with." 1 Creating a tribe of win-win relationships matters deeply in a lonely world.

We Are Bad at Community

Here lies the irony. We are wired for belonging, yet our nomadic lifestyles and digital behaviors push us apart. Zero-gravity careers move us from job to job and city to city. Diverse interests scatter our attention across thousands of subreddits. Social media platforms reward engagement but often breed disconnection. The COVID-19 pandemic became the ultimate distancer.

Robert Putnam described this creeping zeitgeist of loneliness in 2001 with Bowling Alone, years before social media became a siren call. 2 Living a life of digital minimalism requires

diligence and practice. It has never been easier to be anonymous and unconnected, which makes intentional community-building essential.

Is Networking Necessary

Networking means people helping people. Reframe the question as whether helping others is necessary. The answer is yes. If you work in professional services, your success depends on others. To create massive value you must solve novel problems. Craftsmanship requires continuous feedback from paying customers. Career pivots need serendipity as much as strategy. Relational equity takes time, and trust builds slowly over years.

Be Relevant, Not Random

Networking gets a bad rap because we associate it with blind introductions and awkward feigned interest. Last-minute requests from strangers feel transactional and calculated. To start on the right foot, provide context and purpose for reaching out. Get a referral and make the conversation worth their time. Reduce the cost to them with flexible timing, no preparation, and a low ask. Give them an easy out so nobody feels cornered.

The default setting for most people is to keep doing what they are doing. Nobody is eager to meet a stranger. Add 20 percent more curiosity and energy, and networking becomes less scary. Business school students should get comfortable with informational interviews. These are short, low-stress conversations with people you want to learn from. Most people will spare 20 minutes for a curious, respectful, ambitious person.

Network With Anyone, but Watch Your Time

Stay open-minded because we are notoriously bad at predicting our own futures. The organizational chart is not a guide for finding good people. Influential and generous people exist throughout the organization without VP or chief in their title. Diversity helps too. Research shows that heterogeneous networks have more potential value because they are broader and less duplicative. Knowing your 50th database administrator matters less than knowing your first business-to-business marketer. Branch out to other departments, suppliers, and distributors.

Not every connection needs to be an exhausting best-friend relationship. Weak ties matter.

Time is precious and something you cannot readily buy. Fewer, high-quality connections outperform sprawling contact lists. When studying network effects, usage matters more than size. Ask how many strong ties you have and what percentage would meet you for a call this week.

Be Yourself

Networking is about you and the community you want to create. Where are you headed professionally? What is your strategic positioning? How can you add value? Ask whom you respect, whom you want to learn from, whom you can help, and whom you want to be around. This conversation can turn selfish or Machiavellian if you let it. The moment you start seeing people as a ladder to climb, you become a tool nobody wants around.

Generosity Takes Time

You do not develop a robust network overnight. The Chinese adage asks when the best time to plant a tree was, and the answer is 20 years ago. Relationships work the same way. Dorie Clark wrote a Harvard Business Review article titled "It's Not a Job Search, It's a Permanent Campaign" that captures this principle. 3 The executive recruiter corollary says the best time to look for your next job is when you still have the old one.

From caveman days we have been wired for reciprocity. You help me, and I want to help you. Asking favors of people who do not know you or do not have a favorable impression means you are doing networking wrong. You become a relationship spammer. Give before you ask, and give generously.

How Can a New Hire Be Generous

A new hire might ask how they can be generous with the least experience and fewest connections. It is the right question because it focuses on others. The short answer is that you have a lot to offer. Do great work and become the reliable person they call on. Take the burden of administrative trivia off managers by handling meeting minutes. Work on business development, sales pitches, and statements of work. Solve problems with your multimedia, social media, and coding skills. Listen well, ask great questions, and add to every conversation.

For experienced professionals, generosity sounds different. Offer to help newcomers settle in. Ask what they are interested in and what they do well. Connect them with people you know. Kenny Rogers sang that you cannot make old friends, and it rings true. Strong ties help you get jobs, escape career dips, and pursue new paths. Over time, weak ties become strong ties as you find ways to work together.

How Useful Am I to This Tribe

This is the challenging question to ask yourself professionally. What value, curiosity, energy, feedback, insight, and fun can you offer the people you want to tribe with? Use it as motivation to improve your craft, be more generous, and keep a beginner's mind. Networking is not a transaction but a lifelong practice of being a useful human.

- 1Jim Rohn On The Average Of Five People
- 2Bowling Alone And The Decline Of Social Capital
- 3Dorie Clark On The Permanent Career Campaign

Summary

Networking is generosity made deliberate. Plant relationship trees years before you need shade. Stay curious, stay useful, and let reciprocity compound over time. The strongest careers rest on the strongest tribes.