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Networking Internally: Building Relationships While Working Remotely



5 Min Read

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— IN BRIEF

- Working remotely makes it harder to cultivate friendships and navigate a new working environment successfully.
- This first article in a three-part series about networking in the current environment provides tips to make the most out of working from home.

Does the following scenario sound familiar? You are relatively new to a law firm or in-house law department. Your entire interview process was conducted online. You really know nobody. How will you get to be friends with people you don't see in the office every day? How will they get to know you? How will you succeed in a no-touch, keep-your-distance, no-water-cooler-meet-ups, work-from-home environment?

"The more things change, the more they stay the same"

In a normal office setting, you would try to become friendly with members of your team, colleagues in your practice group, and associates in your class. You would learn what the office culture rewards by watching what others do and listening to the informal gossip hotline. You would want your new colleagues to get to know you as a reliable colleague, knowledgeable in your practice area, and a good friend.

In 2020, you still want the same things, but working remotely makes it harder to cultivate friendships and learn how to navigate the new environment successfully. This article highlights some ideas and activities to help you meet these goals.

1. Make an Action Plan

Make a communications plan to organize your efforts to meet colleagues and to learn how they do their work and the values that are important to them. You want your colleagues, bosses, clients, and staff to like you and respect your competence, your willingness to work hard, and your contributions.

Be realistic about how you can showcase your strengths and skills within this new environment. Look at these connections during this time as knowledge-building, relationship-building, and helping others first. Use them to create trust and respect. Look for the individuality within the firm or department among people, offices, geography, and subject matter groupings. Work to understand the different perspectives and value systems, and identify the ones that seem right for you.

Your plan should include the following:

- **Contacts calendar.** Plan one meeting a day either by phone or video chat. These can be fun, chit-chat, "water-cooler" style encounters or more serious discussions of the best way to approach a work initiative or how others usually perform a specific task.

- **Prioritized list of key people to get to know.** These include colleagues, classmates, your boss, your direct client contacts, key staff, etc. Rather than limit yourself to the handful of people you work with today, think broadly about who you want to get to know. Look for mentors, people who can teach you new skills, people who work in areas you might want to move into some day, etc.
- **Background research.** Set aside time in your daily schedule to research the background of people you plan to talk to each day. Your research plus the key topics you want to know more about will become the basis for a conversation agenda that covers what you want to learn, and what you want to share about you.

2. Make a Great Impression

Online or in person, your demeanor makes a statement. Your preparation makes a statement. Your considerateness makes a statement. Therefore, manage how you look, sound, and act.

- **Learn people's communication preferences.** Begin with your boss. Ask what device they want to use to talk to you, when in the day is the most appropriate time to meet with you, and how often you should report in.

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- **Dress appropriately.** A September 20, 2020 *Wall Street Journal* article entitled “The Science Behind WFH Dressing for Zoom” explains that the research on the linkage between what you wear and how your brain functions shows that “dressing up for work can improve your performance.” Thus, the routine of getting into work clothes leads to more powerful abstract thinking and focuses attention. When you change into work clothes, “[y]ou feel physically different, and the clothes feel different so that tells your body, which also tells your mind, that this is work time.”
- **Do your homework.** Before a meeting, remind yourself of its purpose by looking at the list of invitees and reviewing the meeting agenda and materials. Think about where you might want to contribute. To sound authentic and in command of your subject, “imagine that you are speaking to someone whose opinion you value . . . [and] you’ll come across at your best—as you would in a natural conversation.”^[1] In addition, practice active listening. Instead of thinking about your reply while someone else is speaking, pay attention to what the person is saying and show you understand by paraphrasing what they said before offering your response. It is a difficult skill to master but one that encourages responsiveness and showcases your empathy, your ability to meet people where they are, and your interest in creating genuine relationships.
- **Remember video etiquette.** Sit tall as you would at an in-person meeting. Remember

that you are always visible, so show you are following conversations by smiling, laughing, or nodding as appropriate. In addition, mute yourself unless you are speaking. Use the chat feature to add content, such as a relevant article or a sidebar private message to a colleague. Know that when meetings are recorded, the chat box is as well, so share accordingly. Finally, do not multitask. Everyone can see you are not paying attention. Similarly, do not turn off your video to multitask. People will presume your disinterest.

- **Engage in small talk at the beginning and end of meetings.** This makes the meetings feel more natural, like in-person connections.

Your communication plan incorporating these tips can help you gain informal power at work based on your web of relationships that cross the organization, your expertise and contribution to projects, and your genuine interest in other people. “Networking across departments, building expertise in new areas and cultivating charisma are all ways to gain power; and make you a go-to person for colleagues.”^[2]

FOOTNOTES

^[1] Gary Gerard, Blog Post, *Speak for Success: How to Improve Your Presentation Skills for Video Conferencing*, Apr. 12, 2020.

^[2] Sue Shellenbarger, *Gaining Power at Work When You Have None*, *Wall St. J.*, Mar. 7, 2018.