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# Crossing the bridge from network training to development: A guide to move trainees from classroom insights to effective networks

Kristin L. Cullen-Lester [a,*,1], Cynthia K. Maupin [a,2], Theresa M. Floyd [b], Michelle Mahdon [c,3], Alexandra Gerbasi [c,4], Dorothy R. Carter [d,5]

[a] University of Mississippi, Department of Management, School of Business Administration, 304 University Cir., University, MS 38677 United States
[b] University of Montana, College of Business, Gallagher Business Building, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT 59812 United States
[c] University of Exeter, University of Exeter Business School, Building One, Exeter EX4 4PU, United Kingdom
[d] Michigan State University, Department of Psychology, 316 Physics Road, #262, East Lansing MI, 48824, United States

**Abstract**
Professional networks help employees accomplish work tasks, progress in their careers, and thrive personally. Decades of research suggest that achieving these outcomes requires more than simply amassing 'more' network contacts. Instead, networks with certain characteristics (e.g., networks that are open, diverse, and deep) enhance effectiveness. Network *training* teaches trainees about effective networks and helps trainees identify their network development needs by providing feedback on their current network. Once back on the job, trainees are assumed to take appropriate actions to *develop* their networks. However, our research and

* Corresponding author.
    *E-mail addresses:* kclester@bus.olemiss.edu (K.L. Cullen-Lester), cmaupin@bus.olemiss.edu (C.K. Maupin), theresa.floyd@umontana.edu (T.M. Floyd), m.mahdon2@exeter.ac.uk (M. Mahdon), a.gerbasi@exeter.ac.uk (A. Gerbasi), dcarter3@msu.edu (D.R. Carter).
    [1] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8387-6451
    [2] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3120-7015
    [3] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8470-2867
    [4] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4470-4435
    [5] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8480-1996

experience training MBA students, executives, and employees at all levels suggest that trainees often struggle to develop their networks after training. We studied 119 trainees engaged in network training and development to understand why. Our investigation revealed that many trainees fail to set network development goals that match their personalized feedback, identify strategies that match their goals, and take actions to develop networks that match their strategies. These mismatches create gaps in the bridge that trainees build to take themselves from network training to development. Further, even after building strong bridges by aligning their feedback, goals, strategies, and actions, many trainees encounter on-the-job barriers that prevent them from improving the effectiveness of their network. We offer a guide to help address translational gaps and mitigate on-the-job barriers, thereby enhancing the translation of network training insights into network development.

## Introduction

*Network training* is increasingly offered to employees at all levels, particularly to people in formal leadership positions in their organizations. These sessions teach trainees about the characteristics of effective networks and help trainees identify their network development needs, often by providing feedback on the effectiveness of their current network. Although trainees may receive guidance on changing their network during training, actual *network development* (i.e., network change aimed to enhance effectiveness) happens primarily outside training sessions. Trainees must build strong *bridges* connecting the feedback received during training to the actions they take on the job to improve the effectiveness of their network.

Unfortunately, trainees often struggle to build this bridge. Many trainees build weak bridges from network training to development, full of translational gaps created by mismatched feedback, goals, strategies, and actions (see Figure 1). Trainees also experience barriers to network development once they return to work. Together, translational gaps and barriers prevent trainees from engaging in on-the-job actions to improve their network.

We aim to help practitioners and trainees overcome these gaps and barriers to realize the benefits of network training. We address three core questions in our guide to move trainees from classroom insights to effective networks: (1) What are the key objectives of network training? (2) What common problems do trainees have moving from network training to development? (3) How to help trainees build and cross the bridge from network training to development? We hope answers to these questions will help trainees build strong bridges with aligned feedback, goals, strategies, and actions and successfully cross their bridges, overcoming on-the-job barriers to make meaningful changes that improve their network's effectiveness.

## What are the key objectives of network training?

*Network training* is a largely educational endeavor. Trainees learn about effective networks and identify where they would benefit most from network changes. While network development may begin during training sessions (e.g.,
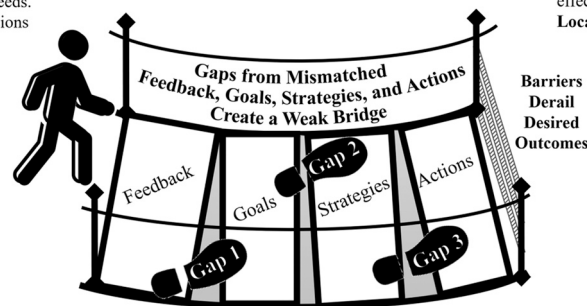


**Figure 1.** Gaps and barriers often prevent trainees from successfully crossing the bridge from network training to network development.

**Table 1**  Biased human tendencies that undermine network effectiveness.

| Bias | Tendency to… | Results in… |
|---|---|---|
| Proximity | develop relationships with people they see often (e.g., colleagues in the same physical location). | networks of contacts similar to the trainee and who tend to know each other. |
| Immediacy | focus on relationships with people they spend time with (e.g., colleagues engaged in shared work). | |
| Homophily | prefer connecting with similar others (e.g., shared traits, attitudes, or favorite activities). | |
| Relational inertia | be reluctant to let go of or back away from established network connections. | failing to develop the network the trainee will need in the future. |

meeting new contacts, deepening connections), a classroom experience, on its own, is unlikely to create meaningful, long-lasting network change. Relationships develop over time as trainees invest time and effort during their day-to-day work. In other words, the 'real work' of network development happens on the job.

## Objective #1: Trainees begin to approach network development intentionally

Many trainees think the network they need will—or *should*—form naturally. They are unaware that basic human tendencies (see Table 1) bias people toward developing ineffective networks. These biases make it unlikely that an effective network develops 'naturally' (i.e., without intentional action). Thus, the first objective of network training is to convince trainees to approach network development intentionally.

## Objective #2: Trainees learn characteristics of effective networks

Many trainees assume "bigger is [always] better" when developing networks. Adopting a "bigger is better" approach spreads time and energy too thin and prevents trainees from investing time and energy in the relationships they really need. Thus, the second objective of network training is to teach trainees about a different approach that focuses on building networks with specific characteristics. Research shows **open, diverse,** and **deep** (O.D.D.) networks better position people to utilize their connections to promote their own and others' effectiveness.

*Network openness* is the extent to which a person's network contacts are connected with one another. A network is more closed when most people to whom a person is connected know each other. In contrast, a network is more open when a person is connected to different groups and clusters of people (i.e., everyone does not know everyone else). Connections among contacts promote trust and create strong norms and mutual obligations; however, being in a closed network also increases the risk of receiving redundant information from network contacts and missing out on new information or opportunities. In contrast, open networks help people avoid groupthink because they receive information the people they are connected to do not have.

*Network diversity* is the extent to which a person's network contacts offer different perspectives based on their

cultural backgrounds, management levels, distinct functional expertize and industry experience, or varied tenure within their organization. Diverse networks expose individuals to new ideas and beliefs, expand their knowledge base and provide access to experts outside their area. Network diversity enables people to make better-informed decisions and develop innovative solutions to problems.

*Network depth* is the extent to which a person's networks consist of deep relationships characterized by frequent interactions, reciprocity, and trust. Although useful information can come from weak ties (acquaintances), important actions by others on a person's behalf and commitment to shared goals usually require mutual trust and understanding. For example, trainees need to build strong ties with stakeholders and sponsors who will advocate for and support them. Developing and maintaining deep relationships requires time and effort. People with effective networks *balance* weak and strong ties, enabling them to capitalize on unique information from acquaintances and advocacy and support from trusted contacts .

## Objective #3: Trainees identify network development needs

Network training identifies trainees' network development needs by comparing their current professional network to the characteristics of effective networks, often using network assessments. Our study (see the About the Research section) used a network assessment built on the O.D.D. framework (see suggested readings for information on network assessment options).

Most trainees benefit from purposeful actions to improve their network's effectiveness. Only 4% of the trainees we studied had open, diverse, and deep networks, making the O.D.D. (as in "out of the ordinary") acronym appropriate. Achieving all three characteristics of an effective network simultaneously requires intentional effort. Feedback provided to trainees revealed a need to open, diversify, and/or deepen their network, which, if addressed, would enhance their workplace effectiveness, career prospects, and well-being.

The most consistent network feedback was for trainees to "open" their network. Of the trainees, 82% received feedback that their core professional network was "closed" instead of "open". Their feedback explained how over-connectedness (too much closure) in their network likely limited their access to new/different information and opportunities. They were advised to venture outside of

their existing professional circles by building relationships with people who did not already know people in their network.

In contrast, 55% of trainees received feedback that they needed to "diversify" their network. Their feedback explained that a lack of diversity in their network might lead them to miss out on new and different perspectives and opportunities, undermining their personal and professional success. They were advised to take stock of what perspectives might be missing from their network and build connections with people that would increase the boundary-crossing ties in their core professional network, increasing the diversity of perspectives available to them.
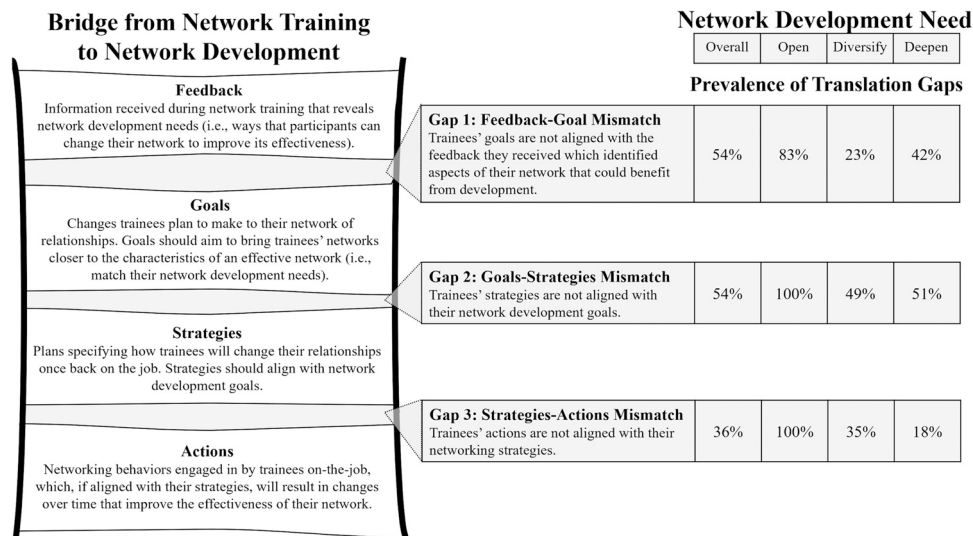
Finally, only 5% of trainees received feedback that they needed to "deepen" their network. They received feedback that their network was distant (i.e., consisting of mostly weak ties or acquaintances). Distant relationships (acquaintances), commonly referred to as weak ties, can provide access to novel information that is not costly to share. However, calling on one's network for the 'big things' (e.g., sponsorship for a promotion, championing a new idea) is only possible when one has built deep relationships based on mutual trust and understanding. Thus, trainees with distant networks were encouraged to strengthen some of their relationships. Approximately 55% of trainees had balanced networks, which meant they had a fairly even mix of close and distant ties. These trainees were encouraged to take stock of whether their deep ties were only to similar people and whether those ties could provide resources they would need to experience personal and professional success. The feedback reminded them that relationships evolve and that it is sometimes important to deepen some relationships and back away from others as their goals change.

## What common problems do trainees have moving from network training to development?

After training, trainees build a bridge to connect what they have learned during training about their network development needs to actions they take on the job to enhance their network's effectiveness (see Figure 1). Transferring training to real life is a common problem in many areas of development. We argue that it is particularly challenging for network development because of the natural human tendencies that people must overcome (see Table 1) and barriers that may derail network development once back on the job.

## Gaps in the bridge trainees build to connect network training and development

Trainees build a strong bridge between network training and development when they (1) set network *goals* that match the feedback they received during training, (2) identify networking *strategies* that match and thus will enable them to achieve their goals, and (3) take networking *actions* (i.e., behaviors designed to develop, maintain, and leverage relationships with others in order to enhance career success) that match their chosen strategies. Trainees build a weak bridge when they fail to align (1) feedback and goals, (2) goals and strategies, and (3) strategies and actions. These mismatches create *gaps* that weaken the bridge and derail network development. Our study revealed that many trainees had gaps in their bridges (see Figure 2). These gaps help explain why, once back on the job, trainees struggle to make meaningful changes to their networks that address the feedback they receive during network training.



| | Network Development Need | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Bridge from Network Training to Network Development** | Overall | Open | Diversify | Deepen |
| | **Prevalence of Translation Gaps** | | | |
| **Feedback** Information received during network training that reveals network development needs (i.e., ways that participants can change their network to improve its effectiveness). | | | | |
| **Gap 1: Feedback-Goal Mismatch** Trainees' goals are not aligned with the feedback they received which identified aspects of their network that could benefit from development. | 54% | 83% | 23% | 42% |
| **Goals** Changes trainees plan to make to their network of relationships. Goals should aim to bring trainees' networks closer to the characteristics of an effective network (i.e., match their network development needs). | | | | |
| **Gap 2: Goals-Strategies Mismatch** Trainees' strategies are not aligned with their network development goals. | 54% | 100% | 49% | 51% |
| **Strategies** Plans specifying how trainees will change their relationships once back on the job. Strategies should align with network development goals. | | | | |
| **Gap 3: Strategies-Actions Mismatch** Trainees' actions are not aligned with their networking strategies. | 36% | 100% | 35% | 18% |
| **Actions** Networking behaviors engaged in by trainees on-the-job, which, if aligned with their strategies, will result in changes over time that improve the effectiveness of their network. | | | | |

**Figure 2.** Gaps created by mismatched feedback, goals, strategies, and actions weaken the bridge from training to development. *Note.* Percentages were calculated by dividing the mismatches in each category by the total. For instance, 98 trainees received feedback to open their networks, and only 17 set goals with that focus. Therefore, there were 81 mismatches; 83% of these trainees set goals that did not match their feedback.

## Gap 1: Feedback - goal mismatch

Many trainees (54%) failed to set goals aligned with their feedback, preventing them from addressing their network development needs. As seen in Figure 2, feedback-goal mismatch was more pronounced for certain network development needs (i.e., open) than others (i.e., diversify or deepen). The allure of network closure was particularly strong, with several trainees with 'closed' networks setting goals that would lead to further network closure. For example, when asked to describe their goals, some mentioned aims to *"connect two areas in my network that could serve as a mutually beneficial relationship"* and *"utilize current connections to build my network and connect with new people."* These goals, if achieved, would result in a *less* open network, further undermining the effectiveness of the trainees' networks. In contrast, an example of a goal that matched the trainee's open feedback was: *"build non-work relationships with people outside of my core network."* Achieving this goal would open up trainees' networks.

Trainees whose networks failed to cross demographic, functional, hierarchical, geographic, or stakeholder boundaries were very likely to set diversifying goals, including *"creating connections outside of the company"* and *"increasing the number of [people at different hierarchical levels] in my network."* Similarly, all trainees with 'distant' networks and many trainees with 'balanced' networks set goals to deepen their networks. For example, *"strengthening bonds by spending time with and getting to know people outside work."* These findings suggest that diversifying and deepening network development needs were easier for trainees to understand and set goals to address than feedback about opening their network.

## Gap 2: Goal - strategy mismatch

Many trainees (54%) struggled to develop networking strategies that matched their goals. All trainees who set "open" goals failed to develop strategies to help them open their network. Many confused opening and diversifying strategies. For example, *"diversifying my network to include more people outside my workplace and immediate geographical area."* This strategy could open up their network, as long as these new connections are not connected to people they already know. However, trainees often tried to use people they already knew to help them cross boundaries, resulting in a more diverse, but not a more open, network. Trainees were more effective at setting strategies to diversify and deepen their network; however, mismatched goals and strategies were still frequent (see Figure 2).

## Gap 3: Strategy - action mismatch

Fewer trainees (36%) struggled to match their networking strategies and actions; however, opening their network continued to be a hard concept to grasp (see Figure 2). All trainees who developed "open" strategies failed to engage in opening actions. This trend suggests that of the three characteristics in the O.D.D. framework, trainees need the most support in understanding and pursuing openness. Practitioners should clarify for trainees networking actions that would align with their strategies. They can also support trainees by helping them overcome barriers that derail their networking actions, which we will discuss next.

## Barriers derail trainees' actions to develop their networks

Even when trainees build strong bridges by matching feedback, goals, strategies, and actions, they often encounter barriers that undermine their attempts to implement what they have learned during training. We organized, into an emergent framework, common barriers to *beginning*, *progressing*, and *maximizing* network development.

### Barriers to beginning network development

Trainees who expressed discomfort, felt dirty, or had limited opportunities failed to begin developing their network. Some trainees described being "outside of their comfort zone." Others were reluctant to engage in networking because they felt inauthentic, insincere, and manipulative. Others reported having limited time and opportunities to develop their professional networks. For example, they described networking as "time off task" and did not see how they could make time, given all the other things they had to do. Others said their supervisor did not value or even discouraged networking. Trainees also reported fewer opportunities to engage in "small talk" over coffee, in the hallway, or before and after meetings due to working remotely.

### Barriers to progressing network development

Trainees struggled to progress their network development, engaging in off-target attempts, experiencing stalled starts, and having difficulty getting personal. Some trainees had trouble identifying whom to connect with to develop their network. They worried their efforts might reinforce, rather than address, their network's weaknesses. Others reported initiating relationships with the best of intentions but failing to follow through to develop those connections. Trainees reported attempts to form connections that got no response and struggling to make personal connections (e.g., being overly work-focused, sharing too much or too little, or reluctance to ask others personal questions).

### Barriers to maximizing network development

Trainees who struggled with balancing give-and-take, diversifying their network, and transitioning relationships failed to maximize their network development. Some trainees were reluctant to ask for assistance, fearing they would appear needy or overly self-interested. Others realized they did not contribute enough to their relationships. They needed to deepen their relationships, establishing greater trust and mutual concern for their contacts to help them achieve their goals. Other trainees struggled to diversify their connections (e.g., connecting with people from different backgrounds, levels of an organization, and expertize). The homophily bias, discussed previously, can be difficult to overcome. Trainees often ask current network connections to help them make new connections, but this approach rarely enhances their network's diversity because people often have similar current contacts. Finally, many trainees struggled to transition relationships, even those

that drained energy, created conflict, or were unnecessary for their well-being and productivity. Many trainees worried they would lose those connections forever or damage their reputation by backing away from their contacts.

## How to help trainees build and cross the bridge from network training to development?

### Steps to building a strong bridge

In this part of our guide, we offer recommendations to help trainees build and cross the bridge from network training to development by aligning feedback, goals, strategies, and actions. First, practitioners should ask trainees to share what they learned about the effectiveness of their network (both strengths and development areas). At this point, answer any questions about their feedback and clarify any lingering misconceptions about what makes an effective network. Trainees should keep the O.D.D. framework in mind as they develop network goals and strategies to help them avoid relying on natural human tendencies that will lead them astray. As we learned, trainees with 'closed' networks struggled to set goals, identify strategies, and take actions to open up their networks. This may be because an 'open' network is a more

abstract concept than a 'diverse' or 'deep' network. To successfully open up their networks, trainees must first understand how their contacts are connected to each other. People tend to be bad at accurately understanding how other people are connected; thus, trainees may need additional support. One concrete strategy is to use network mapping activities like the one the trainees in this study completed. After creating a map of how all their current contacts are connected, trainees can add lines between existing contacts and new potential contacts. This activity will help ensure they are adding people who are not already well connected to their current network.

Second, practitioners should help trainees revise goals to match their specific development needs. For example, trainees who set a "growth" goal might be encouraged to be more strategic and add contacts to increase network openness or diversity. Practitioners should also remind trainees that achieving each network goal will take time and effort; to keep this task manageable, trainees should focus on just a few network development goals at any point in time.

Third, trainees need to be encouraged to set specific goals and identify aligned strategies for changing their network, which they can implement and use to measure their progress. Practitioners should challenge trainees to be thoughtful about the specific actions they will take. For

**Table 2** What trainees and practitioners can do to overcome barriers to beginning network development.

| Barriers | What Trainees Can Do | What Practitioners Can Do |
|---|---|---|
| Discomfort | • Remember, networking is a skill they can improve with practice.<br>• Try to get to know people personally, not just in terms of work.<br>• Ask for an introduction to help ease the discomfort that 'cold calls' can create. | • Set norms for short social touchpoints (e.g., personal updates) to help meeting attendees build connections.<br>• Facilitate formal and informal mentoring opportunities and encourage network development as a focus area.<br>• Create low-stakes opportunities where people can interact informally, such as meet-and-greet sessions between different departments. |
| Feeling Dirty | • Think about what they can offer people and what they need from a relationship.<br>• Connect networking efforts not only to attempts to benefit themselves but a greater purpose or organizational objective.<br>• Consider opportunities to volunteer as a way to expand their connections. | • Emphasize how connections between employees are a win-win for employee and organizational success.<br>• Include networking efforts in performance reviews and as an important part of employees' developmental feedback.<br>• Encourage managers to lead by example and embrace networking, including facilitating introductions of their subordinates to others. |
| Limited Time and Opportunities | • Avoid feeling overwhelmed from developing and managing many connections by focusing on quality, not quantity.<br>• Schedule time to improve their network, thereby treating relationship development as an essential (not optional) part of their job.<br>• Make a plan with aligned goals and strategies to ensure that time devoted to networking is used efficiently and effectively. | • Clarify expectations for employee networking, particularly for external networking activities with clients, partners, and competitors.<br>• Enable employees to attend professional events or work assignments where they can pursue their networking goals.<br>• Adopt technology that enables employees to have flexibility in their networking, such as tools that promote virtual social events or enable easier contact across geographic regions and time zones. |

example: Who will they add as a contact, or from which departments or geographical areas? How will they change specific relationships (e.g., deepening, leveraging, or transitioning)? Why will these strategies help them achieve their network development goals? Trainees can help themselves by considering how their previous networking strategy (or lack of one) contributed to the current state of their network.

Fourth, trainees would benefit from periodic check-ins with their trainer, a coach, or a peer learning partner to discuss what they have been doing to develop their network. During these sessions, trainees can reflect on the match between their actions and strategies, and practitioners can guide them to achieve their network development goals. After approximately 4–6 months, trainees should reassess their networks to measure their progress and reflect on how their network may need to continue to evolve to support their personal and professional success, adapting their network development goals accordingly.

## Remove barriers that derail trainees' actions to develop their networks

Even if trainees have built a strong bridge of matched feedback, goals, strategies, and actions, the barriers discussed previously may still derail network development actions once back on the job. The 'new normal' of increased

virtual and hybrid work has amplified existing and created new barriers for network development, which are important to address because many organizations will utilize virtual and hybrid work more than they have in the past. In this part of our guide, we draw on the literature and our practical experience to identify personal and organizational solutions to overcoming barriers to beginning, progressing, and maximizing network development (see Tables 2-4).

### Overcoming barriers to beginning network development

We identified three key barriers to beginning network development: discomfort, feeling dirty, and limited time and opportunities. Table 2 summarizes personal and organizational solutions to address these barriers.

*Discomfort*

Trainees can improve networking skills by practicing small talk, listening, and learning to ask questions about people's lives and work. Becoming comfortable with these exchanges will make forming and deepening relationships easier. Trainees can look to role models who have built effective networks and ask for advice. They should start small and slow. New skills take time and are bolstered by positive emotions. Trainees might ask for introductions to avoid "cold call" discomfort and encourage their connector to emphasize commonalities and explain why the meeting may be useful for both people. Organizations should encourage networking and provide infrastructure to enable

**Table 3** What trainees and practitioners can do to overcome barriers to progressing network development.

| Barriers | What Trainees Can Do | What Practitioners Can Do |
|---|---|---|
| Off-Target Attempts | • Take stock of existing connections, consider the types of missing people (e.g., a senior mentor? or different disciplines?)<br>• Identify specific individuals who can fill existing holes and create a plan to build connections with them.<br>• Evaluate how new connections align with network feedback and goals and update networking strategies accordingly. | • Offer guidance regarding where strong network connections will enable organizational effectiveness (e.g., between specific groups).<br>• Include network planning in development conversations and team meetings<br>• Provide coaching sessions to help people identify where their networking efforts should be focused and strategies for building, maintaining, using, and transitioning relationships as needed. |
| Stalled Starts | • Schedule time to strengthen connections. For example, book half an hour a week or a month to deepen key relationships by asking how they are and swapping updates on current projects.<br>• Use mutual contacts to help identify common ground and offer to help others by inviting them to meetings of interest.<br>• If people do not want to engage, find ways to connect with others around that person. The alternative may be an even better contact. | • Create an organizational culture that encourages networking both within and outside the organization. Praise networking effort, not only networking success.<br>• Encourage organizational leaders to help trainees identify potential connections that could benefit their career goals.<br>• Enable networking to become a habit by creating consistent opportunities for trainees to form connections via new projects, social events, and development programs. |
| Hard to get Personal | • Do not over-emphasize task efficiency. Do the work, but also share interests and life updates.<br>• Take an interest in others by asking questions and following up on past conversations.<br>• Invest in one-on-one meetings where they can practice active listening, find common ground, and offer assistance. | • Set norms for personal check-ins, for example, when beginning meetings.<br>• Clarify boundaries regarding sharing information so trainees know how to get personal while maintaining professionalism.<br>• Begin meetings by sharing one "good" thing (big or small) to celebrate and learn more about each other. |

**Table 4** What trainees and practitioners can do to overcome barriers to maximizing network development.

| Barriers | What Trainees Can Do | What Practitioners Can Do |
|---|---|---|
| Balancing Give and Take | • Avoid draining their network by thinking about how their expertize, resources, or connections could benefit others and assist them.<br>• Establish helping boundaries and practice saying "no" so they do not drain themselves.<br>• Schedule check-ins with their connections to ensure the relationship remains mutually beneficial. | • Encourage peer mentorship and emphasize how helping others creates a cascade of benefits for individuals throughout the organization.<br>• Review the distribution of resources and personnel for inequity to avoid creating situations where unbalanced relationships will persist due to structural factors.<br>• Promote information sharing, collaboration, and helping behaviors as core to organizational culture. |
| Diversifying Difficulties | • Discover common ground with dissimilar others by discussing both work and non-work topics.<br>• Identify unique skills or perspectives they offer colleagues at lower/higher management levels.<br>• Seek positions or projects which help them span the boundaries of their immediate team and areas of expertize. | • Enhance representation of different people (e.g., expertize, cultural background, gender) within and at all levels of the organization.<br>• Emphasize mentoring and sponsoring diverse trainees to connect them to opportunities.<br>• Set up vertical and peer mentoring within the organization, promoting them to normalize their use. |
| Transition Traps | • Transfer connections to a mentee, providing others with growth opportunities while creating bandwidth in their network.<br>• Remember that if the relationship is deep, their contacts will understand when they need to focus their energy and attention elsewhere.<br>• Back away from relationships with negative or toxic contacts by reducing contact and finding suitable replacements for those connections. | • Empower trainees to hand off relationships (e.g., with clients) to the person best suited to maintain that relationship for the organization.<br>• Identify redundancies or blockages in organizational networks.<br>• Create norms that discourage over-collaboration (e.g., support stepping down from projects or forgoing opportunities as appropriate; reduce team sizes to only include essential members). |

connections. Low-stakes opportunities for new people to meet without a specific goal may reduce discomfort with 'targeted' networking.

*Feeling dirty*

One way to shift the 'networking is dirty' mindset is to focus on what each person will learn from the other as they develop their relationship. Trainees should also focus on what they can provide to others. People bring different things to a relationship. For example, a senior leader might bring years of experience, political know-how, and guidance to a mentoring relationship. At the same time, a junior mentee may interact more directly with customers and get unfiltered feedback about the company that this leader might benefit from hearing. By thinking broadly about what they have to offer and investing in their development trainees can enhance their value as a contact. Organizations can support networking, emphasizing how connections benefit both employees and the organization; thus, they are not just for individual gain. Organizations can also include networking efforts as a component of performance reviews, making networking a core aspect of employee success.

*Limited time and opportunities*

Cultural norms vary regarding the importance placed on developing and maintaining relationships in different organizations. Leaders should emphasize investing in relationships as an expectation. Onboarding and socialization practices can help new employees develop connections to others inside the organization and show them that the company expects them to devote time to developing their networks. Together these efforts will change perceptions that networking is 'time off task.' Organizations must address employees' limited opportunities to develop informal social connections, especially outside their work teams, departments, or engagements, in virtual and hybrid work arrangements. This starts with ensuring employees have the technology to stay in contact with each other and do their jobs. Organizations can also establish norms for small talk or personal check-ins before diving into business during virtual meetings. Finally,

blurred work and home boundaries provide different opportunities for people to get to know each other personally (e.g., children or pets joining video calls). However, being 'always on' has fatigued workers, leaving little time or energy to socialize virtually. To mitigate fatigue, trainees can remind themselves to focus on the quality of their connections rather than quantity.

**Overcoming barriers to progressing network development**

We identified three key barriers to progressing network development: off-target attempts, stalled starts, and difficulty getting personal. Table 3 describes personal and organizational solutions to address these barriers.

*Off-target attempts*

To avoid off-target attempts, trainees can start by identifying broad categories of people who would help them improve their networks' effectiveness and then create action plans to identify contacts who match those needs. Organizations can clarify where networks need to be the strongest (e.g., between certain groups who need to collaborate) and include network feedback as part of developmental conversations. Several trainees reported benefiting from discussing the network development goals and strategies with their supervisors and mentors. These conversations confirmed they were attempting to connect with "the right people" and provided guidance on developing these relationships.

*Stalled starts*

Individuals can overcome stalled starts and other lulls in their relationships by setting aside time for network development each week, including strengthening weaker connections, reactivating important ties that have become dormant, or laying the groundwork for initiating a new connection. Organizations can help trainees overcome stalled starts by creating a culture that values and promotes networking opportunities and helping others achieve their network development goals. Especially in today's technology-mediated workplaces, organizational cultures that make intentional space for all employees to learn about mutual interests and needs will also help overcome barriers associated with beginning and continuing networking conversations.

*Getting personal*

Virtual interactions may make it more difficult to deepen interpersonal connections due to challenges in interpreting body language and verbal cues. Monitoring colleagues' moods and workload is also more difficult (e.g., it is harder to know if they have been in back-to-back meetings, to see the stress on their faces or tension in their shoulders). It is also difficult to do a quick check-in because casually stopping by someone's physical office is impossible.

Nevertheless, forming a personal connection with others is an important aspect of network development. Employees can overcome barriers to getting personal by asking about and sharing information about broader interests, goals, and life activities. Additionally, trainees can demonstrate genuine care for others through active listening, strengthening their relationships. Organizations can support these efforts by incorporating professional and personal check-ins into meetings. In virtual settings, organizations can leverage one-on-one check-ins (or even small-group break-out rooms) to address the unease some people may have with sharing personal information in the more public environments of a larger group meeting.

**Overcoming barriers to maximizing network development**

We identified three key barriers to maximizing network development: balancing give-and-take, diversifying their network, and transitioning relationships. Table 4 describes personal and organizational solutions to address these barriers.

*Balancing give and take*

Trainees can find the right balance between contributing to and benefiting from their relationships. Employees can start the cycle of reciprocity to deepen relationships by helping others in their network. Managers can promote this balance by encouraging peer mentorship and emphasizing how helping others creates a cascade of benefits throughout the organization.

*Diversifying difficulties*

Trainees can seek to intentionally create common ground with dissimilar others by including them in both work-related and non-work-related projects and activities. Establishing some commonality will enhance the likelihood of creating a meaningful connection. Organizations can set up mentoring systems that cross organizational levels, assign people from different groups to co-sponsored projects, and provide time during work to create informal connections that can facilitate future formal connections.

*Transition traps*

There are several ways to back away from relationships, including more subtle actions (like reducing contact time) that can lead to the natural decay of the connection and buffer a person from the effects of toxic or unnecessary connections. Transitioning relationships can also provide opportunities for others or improve effectiveness by removing communication bottlenecks. Nevertheless, many people fall into a transition trap: feeling unable to let go of relationships out of guilt or concern that they will damage their relationship or reputation. It is normal to shift the time and energy spent on different relationships, and deep ties can be reactivated as needed in the future. Organization should support the effective transitioning of relationships by identifying redundancies or blockages in organizational networks and encouraging shifting organizational structures to enhance overall effectiveness.

# Concluding thoughts

Network training sessions are well-suited to accomplish the objectives of helping trainees (1) appreciate the need to approach their networks intentionally, (2) understand the characteristics of an effective network, and (3) identify their network development needs. These objectives prepare trainees to return to work and make meaningful changes to develop their network. However, we cannot assume trainees will build a strong bridge connecting training insights to network development actions on the job.

Many trainees struggle. They build a bridge with translational gaps created by setting goals that do not match their network feedback, identifying strategies that do not match their network goals (i.e., are ineffective or inappropriate), and taking actions that do not match their strategies. Trainees need help to build a strong bridge that will lead to effective network development. Trainees also face many workplace barriers to *beginning*, *progressing*, and *maximizing* their *network development*. Given that network development happens (mostly) on the job, identifying these barriers provides needed insight into why, even when trainees build a strong bridge from network training, they may fail to develop their networks.

We hope educators and practitioners delivering network training sessions and trainees themselves can use this article to understand the components of effective (i.e., O.D.D.) networks, avoid mismatches between feedback, goals, strategies, and actions, and address workplace barriers preventing trainees from capitalizing on efforts to develop their network. Efforts to help trainees improve the effectiveness of their network help trainees' performance, careers, well-being, and the organization's overall functioning. Training efforts can also target entire groups to help group members understand and co-create an effective network structure that facilitates the group's and the organization's success. Regardless of the target of network development— individuals, groups, or the organization as a whole— practitioners must focus on how they can support trainees in building a strong bridge (i.e., connecting insights from training sessions to actual network development on the job) and remove any barriers that prevent or undermine trainees' actions to develop their networks. Doing so will improve the effectiveness of individuals, groups, and entire organizations.

## About the research

### Sample

We studied 119 professional MBA students in the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) across many industries, organizational roles, and hierarchical levels. Our sample was split almost evenly between men and women, with an average age of 36 years (range 21–59) and 11.5 years of work experience (range less than one to 35).

### Procedure

Trainees were actively engaged in improving the effectiveness of their professional networks. As part of their coursework, they completed a network training session in which they learned why it is necessary to approach network development intentionally (Objective 1) and that it is beneficial for people to develop open, diverse, and deep networks (Objective 2). They also completed the *Leader Network Diagnostic* (a network self-assessment). As part of the assessment, trainees listed up to 20 people (average: 11.5) who comprise their core professional network. They reported on the interconnectedness of these individuals (i.e., which contacts know each other). They also described each of their contacts, including the depth of their relationship and information about that person's demographic characteristics, hierarchical level, function, and geographic location. The network assessment used this information to provide feedback on the three aspects of the O.D.D. framework identifying trainees' network development needs (Objective 3).

After completing their network training, trainees returned to work to develop their network. Approximately ten days after the training session, we asked all trainees to reflect on their network feedback and "Identify your network development goals." Ten days later, we asked U.S. trainees (62 participants) to develop strategies to address their goals. Finally,

three weeks later, U.S. trainees reported on the actions they had engaged in to develop their networks.

### Coding and analysis

Three research team members independently coded trainees' feedback, goals, strategies, and actions. We used the O.D.D. framework to categorize the focus of each goal, strategy, and action reported and met to discuss and resolve a few discrepancies. We then analyzed whether trainees' goals matched their feedback, whether their strategies matched their goals, and whether their actions matched their strategies. These comparisons enabled us to determine what percentage of respondents fell into translational "gaps" (i.e., instances where trainees had mismatched feedback and goals, goals and strategies, and strategies and actions).

Trainees' qualitative reports of their activities and the resulting outcomes referenced many barriers that undermined their attempts to develop their networks once back on the job. We analyzed these responses to identify themes. The barriers fell into three emergent categories: 1) barriers to *beginning* network development, 2) barriers to *progressing* network development, and 3) barriers to *maximizing* network development. These categories distinguish barriers that disrupt trainees' efforts to develop their network at different developmental stages. Using insights from the trainees' responses and our authorship team's extensive network training and development experiences, we offered guidance on how practitioners can help trainees and trainees can help themselves to overcome the three most common barriers for each category.

### Selected readings

Readers interested in how to incorporate networks into leadership development, see Kristin L. Cullen-Lester, Cynthia K. Maupin, and Dorothy R. Carter, "Incorporating Social Networks Into Leadership Development: A Conceptual Model and Evaluation of Research and Practice," *The Leadership Quarterly*, 2017, 28(1), 130-152. To learn more about the Open, Diverse, and Deep framework, please refer to Phil Willburn and Kristin L. Cullen, "A Leader's Network: How to help your talent invest in the right relationships at the right time," 2014, Greensboro: Center for Creative Leadership, Kristin L. Cullen-Lester, Meredith L. Woehler, and Phil Willburn, "Network-based leadership development: A guiding framework and resources for management educators," *Journal of Management Education*, 2016, 40(3), 321-358.

To read more about why networks are important for individuals' performance, careers and well-being, see Herminia Ibarra & Mark Hunter, "How leaders create and use networks," *Harvard Business Review,* 2007, 85, 40. Brain Uzzi and Shannon Dunlap, "How to build your network," *Harvard Business Review,* 2005, 83(12), 53-63. Rob Cross and Robert J. Thomas, "How top talent uses networks and where rising stars get trapped." *Organizational Dynamics*, 2008, 37, 165-180.

To learn more about overcoming discomfort with networking and feelings of dirtiness, read: Tiziana Casciaro, Francesca Gino, and Maryam Kouchaki, "Learn to love networking: Interaction." *Harvard Business Review,* 2016, 94(7), 4. To learn more about key boundaries within organizations and how to connect across them, read Chris Ernst and Donna Chrobot-Mason, "Flat world, hard boundaries: How to lead across them," *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 2011, *52*(3), 81–88. To learn more about the benefits of reconnecting with people, see Daniel Z. Levin, Jorge Walter, and J. Keith Murnighan, "Dormant ties: The value of reconnecting," *Organization Science*, 2011, *22*(4), 923–939. To avoid collaboration overload, read Rob Cross, Reb Rebele, and Adam Grant, Collaborative Overload, *Harvard Business Review*, 2016, *94*(1), 74-79.

Training programs commonly use network self-assessment to help trainees understand the current state of their network and its effectiveness. These assessments focus on trainees' core connections (inside and outside their organization) to help them develop their professional networks. Those interested in completing their professional network assessment might consider taking the Leader Network Diagnostic (www.networkleader.com), Network Assessment Exercise (from Harvard Business Review), or Social Capital Questionnaire (https://executive-tools.insead.edu/socialcapital/). Many organizations also conduct network assessments that utilize data from surveys and trace data (e.g., emails, LinkedIn connections, Slack, or Teams messages) of entire departments or organizations. Data from those assessments could also be extracted and analyzed to provide feedback to trainees regarding the network (within the bounds set by that assessment, e.g., department or organization).

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## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Kristin L. Cullen-Lester:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Visualization, Supervision, Project Administration, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Funding acquisition. **Cynthia K. Maupin:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. **Theresa M. Floyd:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. **Michelle Mahdon:** Investigation, Writing – Review & Editing. **Alexandra Gerbasi:** Writing – Review & Editing. **Dorothy R. Carter:** Writing – Review & Editing, Funding acquisition.

## Declarations of interest

None.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.