



Financial Mail Women's Forum Blog #1: The Reluctant Networker

Neil Munz-Jones published *The Reluctant Networker* in 2010. It has been featured in a number of leading publications such as *The Sunday Times*, *The Guardian*, *People Management* and *Good Practice*. In the first in a series of blogs Neil writes about what networking actually means. In future blogs he will cover the many different ways that we can network along with several principles, practical tips and do's and don'ts from his book.

Networking myths and realities:

"It is our attitude at the beginning of a difficult task which, more than anything else, will affect its successful outcome" William James, American psychologist and philosopher

It is important to have a positive mindset about networking. Done well, networking can be time-consuming and it can be hard to predict what the benefits will be and when they will come. In addition many people have negative thoughts about it based around a number of common myths. As a result it is easy to keep putting off what we know we ought to be doing.

Myth and reality #1

✓ A means to an end with lots of different ways to achieve it

✗ The end itself

A common misconception about networking is that it is all about going to networking 'events'. It is true that a lot of networking is done this way, but there are many other ways to network as well.

When I run seminars on networking it is amazing how many people's view on networking goes something like this: a) networking is about going to events and working a room full of strangers; b) I don't enjoy this and am not much good at it; c) therefore I am no good at networking, so 'networking may be good for others but it is not for me'. These are what I call in my book 'Reluctant Networkers'. However when I suggest that meeting up with a former colleague who they had not seen for a few years over lunch or a coffee is also networking, I get a response along the lines of 'oh yes I don't mind doing that'. The response is similar when I suggest getting on LinkedIn and reconnecting with former colleagues and classmates as another form of networking. When participants start to think more broadly about how to network they come up with all sorts of different ways to do it, some of which they even enjoy!

Myth and reality #2

✓ A lifelong approach to doing business

✗ Something to be done when you 'need' something (a job, a new project etc)

A lot of people's negative associations with networking are because they tend to do it only when they need something. Someone in one of my talks described it as a bit 'grubby' because she felt like she was asking for a favour, often from people she did not know well. The reality is that when you are working and not used to networking it is hard to get started. Jobs are increasingly demanding and so it is hard to carve out time to go and meet people when you don't have a specific goal in mind to discuss. If you are not a seasoned networker it is pretty easy to find reasons not to go to that networking drinks or breakfast where you probably won't know anyone (catch up on some work, go home and see one's family, read a book, watch paint dry...). So we tend to wait until we need something and then all of a sudden it feels awkward having to ask for help. Effective networkers take a different approach. They view their networks as life-long relationships that they build and nurture over time...kind of like planting trees that become stronger over the years. Even when they are busy and don't 'need' anything they still invest some of their time in meeting new people and developing their existing relationships. It feels so much easier to do (even if you have less time) when you don't need anything from your networking contacts.

Myth and reality #3

✓ A two-way activity based on mutual support

✗ 'Using' people to get what you want

This is closely linked with Myth #2. The best way to build a long-term relationship with someone is to find ways you can help them. Effective networkers will spend as much time helping people in their network as they do getting help from their contacts. I used to work with a colleague who was famous for only calling when he needed something; he never returned our calls. As a result when he rang us we used to say "so what do you want this time?!" and never volunteered anything but the bare minimum of help. Yet most people are fundamentally collaborative, they like to help...and be helped as well. If you view networking in this light, you are likely to find it a much more enjoyable and productive activity.

Myth and reality #4

✓ Applicable to all working professionals

✗ Something only for the bosses or salespeople...or people looking for a job

The final myth revolves around who needs to network. Many people assume that unless they are out of work, they don't need to network to do their jobs well. Unless you are in sales or a boss that needs to bring in new business, why do it? Yet in today's digital world where we are all expected to know the answers to everything instantly, networking is becoming an essential tool to do any job well. We could spend hours on the internet researching answers but that can be time-consuming and much of the information will be out of date and of limited value. Yet if we have a good network of contacts where we have built two-way relationships over time, it is amazing how willing these contacts are to help us solve our challenges at work. Networking is a great way to stay ahead of developments in our field, know what the competition are up to, find the best service providers, take up genuine references on potential recruits, find new sources of Finance or grants etc etc.

So think about how you think about networking...what is your mindset and does it need to change?

Next up...principles of good networking

About the book and the author:

*Since publishing *The Reluctant Networker* last year he has given talks and run workshops on networking for organisations such as The FT, The IOD and INSEAD as well as several professional services firms. In addition to giving talks on networking Neil runs mdj2 associates a consulting firm working with clients on the Retail sector.*

See www.reluctantnetworker.com for more information. Copies can be purchased directly from the site or from Amazon and all other major online book stores as well as selected Waterstones stores.