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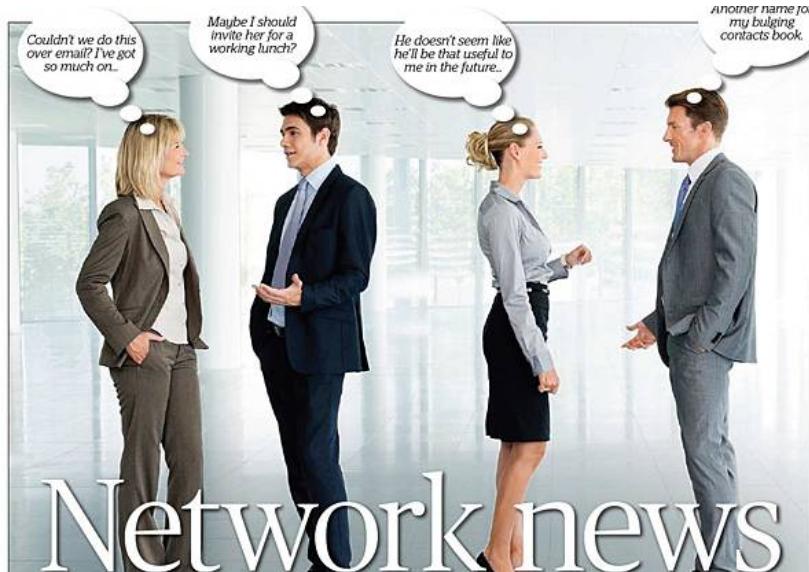
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# Why women should take the lead from men when it comes to networking

It's official: men and women do it differently. But when networking, we all need to man up, says Joshi Herrmann



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Joshi Herrmann

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It's not what you know but who you know," is the dispiriting formula we often recall to explain the holes in our professional meritocracy. But perhaps it should be: "It's not who you know, but how well you know them." That's the suggestion from economist Paul Seabright in his new book *The War of the Sexes*, and his research on how we network could explain why too few women currently occupy top positions in business and politics.

Seabright thinks that our preferences for whom we interact with were formed by millions of years of evolution "to reflect the kinds of people with whom our ancestors found it most prudent to interact". Because our most reproductively successful male ancestors could mate with hundreds of partners (think Genghis Khan) whereas women were constrained by how many children they could have at one time, men have an innate preference for a more expansive mode of interaction with others.

Using the data of 16,000 board members and senior executives in European and US companies, Seabright and a colleague gave each one a score based on how many currently powerful people they had met during their career — so someone who had worked with lots of current board members and senior managers would have a higher score than someone who had spent time with colleagues who struggled for promotion.

As expected, those with a high score of 250 had between two and four per cent higher salaries than those with the average score of 150, and double that when stock options were counted. Those who knew the right people made progress faster than their less-connected peers.

Then something in the sample jumped out at Seabright: the "who you know" rule simply wasn't applying to women. While male executives with high scores for their networks had four per cent higher salaries and 10 per cent higher stock options, female executives didn't. "It's as though all those contacts earlier in their careers were bringing them no benefit at all," he writes. So it wasn't that women hadn't bumped into the right influential people, but that were not benefiting from those contacts like their male colleagues.

Significantly, Seabright concludes that "once you adjust for the different productivity of men's and women's contacts in determining their salaries, the effect of gender becomes small and no longer statistically significant. Basically, men get an edge from their networks and women don't." Showing exactly why and how women's networks are less effective is more difficult, but Seabright says it might have something to do with "weak ties".

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A 1990s US study found that, when asked to name up to five people with whom they had discussed "important matters" in the previous half year, working men mentioned a higher proportion of co-workers than working women, and the women named a higher proportion of kin. The study, and others like it, have been taken to mean that men tend to "cultivate" a broader network of transactional "weak ties", rather than concentrating their attention on a small group of personal friends. A separate study has shown that weak ties are more helpful than strong ties when it comes to job hunting because while strong ties are more inclined to tell you what they know, weak ties are more likely to know of opportunities that you don't know about. Jane Scott, from Professional Boards Forum, says she recognises that a reluctance to "cultivate" a network can be a problem among women. "I was at a dinner party with an extremely successful banker, who said he saw everyone he did business with once a week or twice a month," she says. "The women were flabbergasted."

Scott doesn't think that the genetic origin of these differences suggested by Seabright should discourage women, however. "Whatever the reasons are, there are very practical ways that women can overcome their reluctance," she says. "Most women find that it is much more enjoyable than they thought it would be."

**Five things women can do to improve their networks:**

1. Define the sort of opportunities that most interest you and develop a succinct description of what you are good at. Let this "mission" help you target your networking and articulate your ambitions.
2. Work out who the influential figures are in your chosen field, and set out to become known by them.
3. Dedicate regular time to networking and treat this activity as a proper work project. One alumna of the Professional Boards Forum sat down every other Saturday and spent a couple of hours networking in her quest to get on a FTSE 100 board. She succeeded.
4. Network proactively in social situations. Many a business opportunity has come from a chance meeting at the school gates or at a drinks party. Don't forget to ask your old friends for help, ideas and introductions.
5. Network with men as well as women. Find attractive alternatives to the traditional male networking venues, like bars and pubs. Suggest coffee or tea-time meetings in one of the elegant lounges in leading London hotels, for example.

Jane Scott is the UK director of the Professional Boards Forum, an organisation that identifies future women FTSE board directors and connects them with the business leaders who influence appointments. [boardsforum.co.uk](http://boardsforum.co.uk)

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