

Ad

Gender

# The Secrets of Successful Female Networkers

From the November–December 2019 Issue



Tim Bower

## One oft-cited reason why more female executives don't advance to top

0/2 REMAINING > REGISTER

personal obligations, from office housekeeping to child-rearing, that disproportionately fall to women, leaving them less time to develop professional relationships.

Listen to this article

Speed + | -



00:00 / 08:19

Feedback Listen on Noa

But some female leaders do establish strong networks—and they win greater influence and more-senior positions as a result. What are they doing differently?

A new study sheds light on their strategies. “I was talking with many women about how to improve their networks, the challenges they face, and what they and their organizations could do better, and I realized that all the studies on the issue were pretty old and narrow,” explains Inga Carboni, a professor at William & Mary’s Mason School of Business and the study’s lead author. “I couldn’t answer their questions.”

The researchers analyzed data collected from 16,500 men and women in more than 30 organizations across a range of industries over the past 15 years. Then they interviewed hundreds of female executives. This led them to identify four characteristics that distinguish the networking behaviors of more-successful women from those of their peers. In some cases those matched the behaviors of high-performing men; in others there were subtle but important differences.

When shaping their professional networks, top women were:

### **Efficient.**

Studies, including the new one, show that women generally absorb more collaborative demands in the workplace than their male peers do. But the female managers with the strongest networks “recognize that every ‘yes’

0/2 REMAINING > REGISTER

has adopted that idea as her mantra. Although these successful female networkers might feel an identity-driven desire and a stereotype-influenced pressure to help colleagues out and be a team player, they try to resist. They prune nonessential appointments from their calendars, deflect low-priority decisions and requests, run streamlined meetings, insist on efficient email norms, and set aside time for reflection and high-level thinking. At the same time, they make the most of their collaborative strengths and inclinations by working with others in a way that establishes or enhances key relationships and ups their visibility.

“At every level in organizations, women are more likely to be sought out for advice,” Carboni says. “And when asked about the downsides of saying no, every woman I interviewed said they’d feel bad.” But she emphasizes that the research is clear: The female executives who rise to the top are “more strategic and thoughtful” about how they spend their time.

Organizations can do their part by tracking unseen collaborative work, ensuring that it’s evenly spread among male and female employees, and pushing all leaders, but especially women, to unabashedly prioritize their most important tasks.

### **Nimble.**

The researchers’ data shows that most women’s relationships, particularly those with female peers, are stickier than men’s, growing stronger, more mutual, and more interwoven over time. Carboni and Cross note that this can occasionally be a positive—for example, an old contact might offer a new opportunity or employment prospect. But if you work in a dynamic organization that requires rapid adjustments to changing demands (and who doesn’t nowadays?), always relying on the same people can hurt your performance.

Successful female networks are more fluid. High-ranking women know when to deemphasize old connections in favor of new ones (whether by proactively cutting ties or by simply failing to maintain contact). For

will help you reach them—whether those goals are political (gaining early access to opinion leaders), developmental (supplementing skills gaps), innovation-oriented (searching for new insights), or related to best practices (finding people who know efficiencies.” He acknowledges that some women find this inauthentic, even Machiavellian, but notes that men interpret the same behavior as putting the work first. He says it’s OK to have a “tenure bell curve” in professional relationships. Women should, of course, maintain some long-known advisers. But they should consistently initiate new connections, and organizations can help them by instituting processes such as network reviews at the start of new assignments or during performance evaluations.

### **Boundary-spanning.**

The highest-ranking, best-networked women connect with people in a wide variety of functions, geographies, and business units. Again, less successful female networkers tend to shy away from the tactic because it feels uncomfortable or overly promotional. “We heard from women that they liked their own communities,” Carboni says, whereas spanning boundaries made them wary of “backlash” and “stressed out.” But that behavior is critical to accessing new information, leading innovation, and pursuing advancement, for both women and men. Cross suggests periodically considering the leaders in your organization and asking yourself, “Who isn’t in my network but should be?” He advises approaching them “not with ‘Here’s what I need’ but with ‘Could we grab a coffee and explore ways of working together?’” Companies including Ford and Booz Allen Hamilton have tried to institutionalize the practice by setting up cross-functional groups of female high potentials who meet regularly with C-suite executives.

### **Energy-balanced.**

More than two decades’ worth of research shows, perhaps not surprisingly, that the highest performers are seen as the most energizing people in their networks—as the type of colleague who makes the work

0/2 REMAINING > REGISTER

where effective female networkers set themselves apart from less successful women: They demonstrate both competence and warmth, both intelligence and emotional intelligence, as studies—the researchers' and others—suggest they must to build trust. “The most successful women don’t downplay their knowledge, skills, and accomplishments; they show evidence that they can do things,” Cross says. “But they also use humor, presence, and small gestures to signal caring and positivity, and they employ listening skills to spur creative thinking among their colleagues.”

The researchers say they hope more women will adapt their networking behaviors in keeping with these four characteristics. They add that organizations have a big role to play too. “The goal is to embed these behaviors and practices so that they’re the norm for everybody,” Cross says.

About the Research: “How Successful Women Manage Their Networks,”  
by Inga Carboni et al. (working paper)

---

## “You’re Closer to Everyone Than You Think”

Julie Lodge-Jarrett has worked at Ford Motor Company for 21 years, holding positions around the world. Currently the chief talent officer, she leads an initiative to encourage colleagues to develop better networks among the company’s 73,000 salaried employees. She spoke with HBR about the special challenges female professionals face when trying to make connections. Edited excerpts follow.



0/2 REMAINING > REGISTER