



## Networking for Innovation: Partners, sponsors and smart people

April 2007

***Executive summary – For an innovation to provide value, people need to be enlisted to fulfill a variety of roles. Their advice, perspectives, insights, advocacy contacts and ability to enable the ideas must be put to work, often without much in the way of financial incentives. Building a good personal network, by exercising good people skills, contact management and building social capital, is an essential key to successful innovation.***

*This Executive Technology Report is based on a personal essay by Peter Andrews, Consulting Faculty Member at the IBM Executive Business Institute in Palisades, New York.*

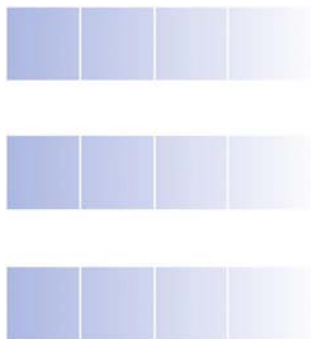
Innovation is a social activity, but idea people – writers, composers, inventors, researchers – love their private time, those moments when they have a pad of paper, a piano or a lab full of toys that they can use to satisfy their curiosity. Unfortunately, ideas, manuscripts and inventions don't make an impact – don't become innovations – until they go beyond the idea person (or the developer or the venture capitalist or any other person who participates in the innovation endeavor). Emerson's adage – build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door – isn't supported by much evidence in the real world.

Innovation takes people skills. In particular, an aspiring innovator needs to engage people that can do things he or she can't. These may include sponsors, partners, customers, critics and advisors. Innovators rely on those in their networks to provide:

Advice – By definition, to innovate is to step into the unknown. This means that you need access to the experience, knowledge and judgment of others.

Perspectives – Did you ever discover that you had a talent because a teacher or a friend recognized it in you? We don't always see the best of what we have to offer, and this is particularly true for innovations. People will naturally look at your ideas in a different light, often to your advantage. And, when they tell you that your idea is already available for free as a download, you can save a lot of time and effort. And like a musician, you'll never know when to jump in if you are not listening to what the others in the band are doing. You can't get the timing right without the help of others.

Insight – You can't really brainstorm with yourself. You need to bounce ideas off someone else to clarify them and, often, to come up with amalgams of notions that are more than the sum of their parts.





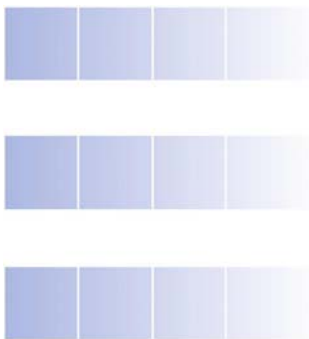
Promotion – Ideas create natural enemies. It is good to have allies out there, in their own locales of influence, telling people your idea is not dangerous, stupid and redundant. In fact, it's brilliant.

Access – If you already get the best table and have your calls returned by celebrities, you don't need this. If you don't, you need the right people in your network to get the power, influence and resources in order to get the most value from your innovation.

Enablement – Innovations require builders, sponsors, testers, customers and more. These are the people who convert your radical idea into a familiar part of everyday life. You can't fill all these roles yourself.

Much that is written about networking revolves around finding job opportunities – selling yourself. And for innovation, you definitely need to create trust and confidence in yourself and what you do. But networking for innovation involves more focus and a commitment to take a journey into the unknown. So here are some general networking actions, together with thoughts on how they apply to the innovator:

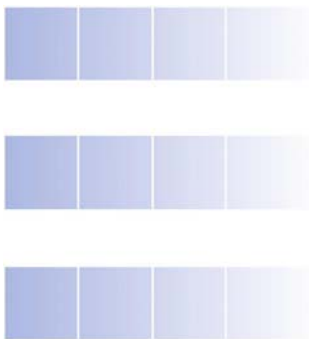
1. **You need to be genuinely interested in other people** – Since innovators are naturally curious, developing interest is not too difficult. But first they need to meet people. They need to develop conversation skills (or, if they are just too shy, find a partner who can take this role). They need to get the other person talking – which means, they need to know when to keep quiet. They need to put aside their own egos and ideas. This is difficult because it means reserving the passion for the idea until a time when trust in the relationship is more developed.
2. **You need to be able to listen – and not just to the content, but to the needs, interests, passions and emotions.** And if you are face-to-face, listen with all your senses. Ask good questions without being an interrogator – since an innovator never knows how someone might be of help, this may mean listening through several layers of discussion before anything is obvious. It is good to have profiled the kinds of people who might be of assistance. It is bad to let those profiles distort, filter or block development of relationships. A good guiding principle is that everyone is a potential ally. You just need to take the time to find out. Since time is at a premium, this may be hard to accept. Nobel Laureate Linus Pauling once said that the reason he had so many good ideas was because he had so many ideas. The reason why great innovators have so many powerful relationships is because they have so many relationships.
3. **When you meet people, it is better to have them give you their cards than for you to press your cards on them** – It may feel great to have handed out dozens of your cards, but what does it really mean? What's your next step? A card you receive is often a token of a successful meeting and good conversation. It means your investment of time is showing some potential. If you have their





cards, you have the power and permission to contact them. You also have a simple place to put a note or two about their interests and needs. An innovator can even write a note on the back **about how the person might be of benefit to advancing the innovation.**

4. **Keep in contact with people you meet** – Contact management is a wonderful skill, and it requires being systematic. You need to put things on the calendar. You need to inventory existing and potential touchpoints, and then methodically take advantage of them. And sure, it's great to remember their birthdays, but it is better if every point of contact brings THEM value. Good rule of thumb: if you haven't provided them with value in 90 days, you no longer have them in your network – unless there is a legal document (e.g., a marriage license). For an innovator, a tentative plan needs to be formed to discover how these people might be allies and how to bring them on board. Don't expect people to join the team when they first meet you. But also don't rely on them to volunteer to join, even when they know what you are trying to achieve and how they might help. You need to ask.
  
5. **Do people favors, even when there is no clear expectation of return** – Those who are best at networking are naturally generous. They share knowledge, contacts and even resources. And graciously accept favors, advice and offers of help – even if you could do it better. This last is particularly hard for clever, “know-it-all” innovators, but it is essential. Humans appreciate favors done for them. In fact, Francis Flynn, a professor of organizational behavior, has reported that favor receivers actually value favors more than favor doers (at least at first).<sup>1</sup> The history of innovative teams is full of members doing favors for each other – everything from buying each other drinks to finding jobs to getting each other out of jail. Obligations (both professional and social) owed one to the other, criss-crossing the membership of a team – if taken seriously – build mutual bonds of trust and appreciation of skills, loyalty and integrity. Social capital is built by working in two directions, not just one.
  
6. **Be a yenta: Help people find other people** – Share valuable contacts. If you are the person who knows the answer and can get things done, or you know who to go to, you are golden and the phone will ring. And people will want to help you be successful. Being the connector puts you in the middle of things so you know what's happening.
  
7. **Always keep your commitments and tell the truth (without being rude)** – For the innovator, this includes answering that difficult question, “So how far along are you with this idea?” Or, “Has anyone else succeeded in doing this?” It may be tempting to exaggerate or embroider the facts. Resist this temptation. Those who make the most effective members of an innovation team are those who have the





straight story and know the risks. Think ahead of time about how you can answer these questions effectively and honestly.

8. **Find projects you can do together for mutual benefit** – Recently, the former president of college was being interviewed about a novel she wrote with someone. The interviewer asked: “Why did you work together?” Her answer: “To be sure we’d stay in touch.” The more you can go beyond words in your relationships to actions, the stronger the bonds of your network will be. Since there is always a lot of work to make an innovation successful, offering opportunities should be easy. But look to do work yourself, especially if it will extend your capabilities or give you new insights.

How do you get started with networking? Here are three steps:

- First, do an honest evaluation of your people skills and make an effort to improve them.
- Second, do an inventory of your network. You can start with folks who can provide advice, perspectives, insights, promotion, access and enablement for your innovation.
- But don’t stop there. Remember: everyone is a potential ally. That includes your in-laws, your friends and those people sitting next to you at your kid’s recital. If you don’t believe that everyone is within six degrees of separation, at least act as if you do.
- Third, get out there. Be accessible and visible. Nowadays, that means going beyond glad-handing people at parties and conferences. You need to find online opportunities, such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis and perhaps your own website. If, as Woody Allen said, 90 percent of success is showing up, these are where you are supposed to be today. And remember, it is two ways. If you blog, cite and comment on other people’s blogs. Ask people questions in emails. Use search engines to find great, relevant articles, and then give the authors a call.

And be generous with your time. Most people today understand what a great gift your time and attention are. So respond to emails as promptly as you can. Put your phone number on correspondence. Thank people for comments to your blog. You may even do something really radical: send someone a handwritten letter. They will be shocked, amazed and grateful.

Technology to watch
Networking
Cluster modernization
Social media



***For those who'd like to learn more, see “Innovation Roles and Frameworks,” <http://www.ibm.com/ibm/palisades/courses/irf/irf.html>. This IBM workshop helps the student identify and choose the best pathways for innovation, then determine what talents and skills are required to move an idea forward. Using real examples, the class will develop value propositions, learn to anticipate barriers and setbacks and make alliances that increase the value of an innovation.***

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**“House of the Future” Case** <http://www.ersa.org/ersaconfs/ersa04/PDF/82.pdf>

#### **Networking for Innovation: Anecdotal Evidences from a Large Sample Study of Innovative Enterprises**

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(requires purchase of full article)

**Open Innovation** by Henry Chesbrough [http://www.amazon.com/Open-Innovation-Imperative-Profiting-Technology/dp/1422102831/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_sr\\_1/104-5518432-6962335?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1176303031&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Open-Innovation-Imperative-Profiting-Technology/dp/1422102831/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1/104-5518432-6962335?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1176303031&sr=8-1)

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### **About this publication**

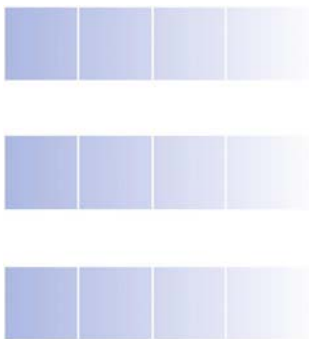
*Executive Technology Report* is a monthly publication intended as a heads-up on emerging technologies and business ideas. All the technological initiatives covered in *Executive Technology Report* have been extensively analyzed using a proprietary IBM methodology. This involves not only rating the technologies based on their functions and maturity, but also doing quantitative analysis of the social, user and business factors that are just as important to its ultimate adoption. From these data, the timing and importance of emerging technologies are determined. Barriers to adoption and hidden value are often revealed, and what is learned is viewed within the context of five technical themes that are driving change:

**Knowledge Management:** Capturing a company's collective expertise wherever it resides – databases, on paper, in people's minds – and distributing it to where it can yield big payoffs

**Pervasive Computing:** Combining communications technologies and an array of computing devices (including PDAs, laptops, pagers and servers) to allow users continual access to the data, communications and information services

**Realtime:** "A sense of ultracompressed time and foreshortened horizons, [a result of technology] compressing to zero the time it takes to get and use information, to learn, to make decisions, to initiate action, to deploy resources, to innovate" (Regis McKenna, *Real Time*, Harvard Business School Publishing, 1997.)

**Ease-of-Use:** Using user-centric design to make the experience with IT intuitive, less painful and possibly fun





**Deep Computing:** Using unprecedented processing power, advanced software and sophisticated algorithms to solve problems and derive knowledge from vast amounts of data

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