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How to Build Meaningful Workplace Relationships



The most valuable contacts aren't necessarily sitting in the C-Suite.
PHOTO: TAMMY LIAN AND JAKE ZUKE

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In brief

- Technology can work to your advantage—use it.
- Cast a wide net.
- Do your research and make sure it shows.

Whether you are working remotely, from an office or picking up part-time gig work and odd jobs, it is crucial to [network](#) so you can forge and strengthen relationships with your colleagues. It is not just senior staff who can help you advance in your career. Your peers and junior colleagues can also become helpful contacts and give you some insight into the avenues you do and don't want to pursue professionally. Even if you consider yourself a [wallflower](#), there are techniques you can use to make the most of your working relationships, say networking experts.

1. Take advantage of technology.

Remote work is [here to stay](#), even if it is just occasional or part-time. That may mean you are missing out on casual chats with your colleagues and impromptu corridor encounters that once led to constructive exchanges and fresh ideas. There is plenty of telecommunication technology that can make connecting with your colleagues easier than ever, especially if you are reaching out to high-level managers or executives.

Technology presents fewer obstacles than meeting in person, says Anne Sample, chief executive of Navigate Forward, a firm that helps employees figure out how to make transitions in their careers. "In the past, you had to figure out where you were going to meet," she says. "You had to get past their executive assistant to get on the calendar and work around their business travel."

Tech tips

- **Shoot a message to a mutual connection.** A manager, colleague or human resources representative might be able to make a personal introduction to boost the chances your outreach gets attention.
- **Suggest a time on their calendar.** You can use calendar apps like Google Calendar, Outlook, and iCal to view another employee's availability. Propose a 15-to-30-minute meeting on a day in their calendar that isn't jam-packed with other engagements.
- **Use chat apps for more informal conversations.** Don't be afraid to use Slack, Google Chat, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp—whatever communication platform your company uses for quick messages—to connect with people you may not have met in person.

In this phase of the digital age, there are more opportunities for connection. "In-person events really only brought you local connections," says Sarah Benken, founder and CEO of networking group The KNOW Women. "With this online way of [Facebook](#) and Zoom parties and all these things happening, you can now connect with people from all over the globe."

2. Look for potential connections everywhere.

The most valuable contacts aren't necessarily sitting in the C-Suite. In addition to leaders you admire, look for possible connections at your level on different teams. Your boss's boss's boss may have plenty of valuable advice and experience, but someone closer to your level could have more practical advice to help you figure out the next steps on your specific career path—and they may have more direct influence. Even if you don't think a connection will be useful now, it could be down the line. Establishing relationships with colleagues can help to ensure you are front of mind when a slot on a project, internal job opening or other opportunity comes up.

Don't be afraid to ask. "So many women, or young people for that matter, are fearful to ask or be shut down," Ms. Benken says. "If you are at a large corporation, I would look at some of the programs that the company offers and see where you can plug in."

If you don't know who to reach out to:

- **Ask a supervisor.** If you have a good rapport, your manager will be able to connect you or recommend people to contact based on your goals.
- **Ask the HR or leadership development team.** Tell them what kind of person you are looking to connect with.
- **Ask someone on your team.** Your colleagues are more likely to be connected with people closer to your level.
- **Look for employee resource groups (ERGs).** Joining these employee-led, identity-based groups can provide a great way to meet colleagues from outside your department, some of whom may share your experiences or values.

Chances to build connections with co-workers aren't limited to the office (or work Slack channels). After-hours company events, like clubs, social gatherings and professional network meetings offer valuable opportunities to make connections in an informal environment.

“With this online way of Facebook and Zoom parties and all these things happening, you can now connect with people from all over the globe.”

— Sarah Benken, The KNOW Women

3. Come prepared.

Read up on a person's professional history on LinkedIn or the company directory before meeting with them. Prepare a concise response to the question, "Tell me about yourself." The time you have set aside to meet is valuable and they don't need to hear your life story.

Make sure the person you are meeting with understands:

- Why you wanted to meet with them specifically.
- What your goals for the meeting are.
- How you intend to follow up on advice or connections they share.

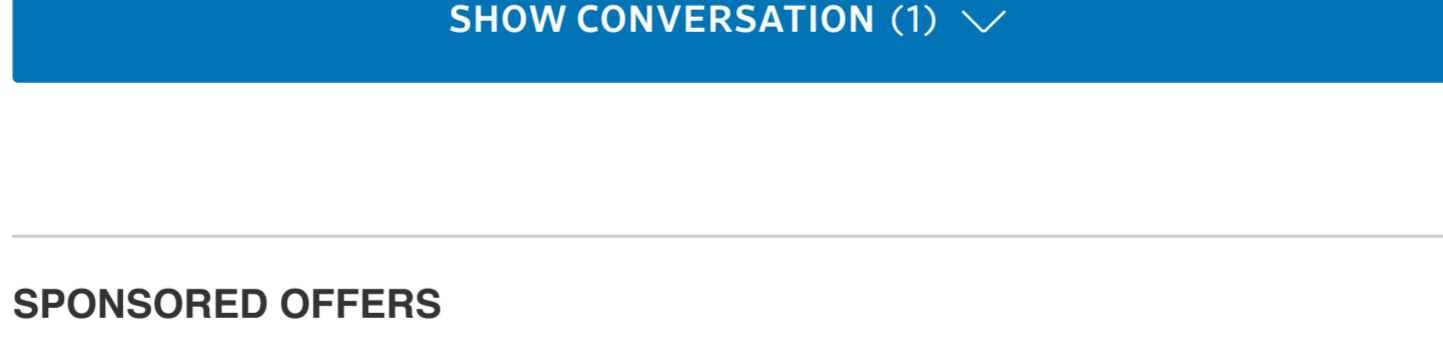
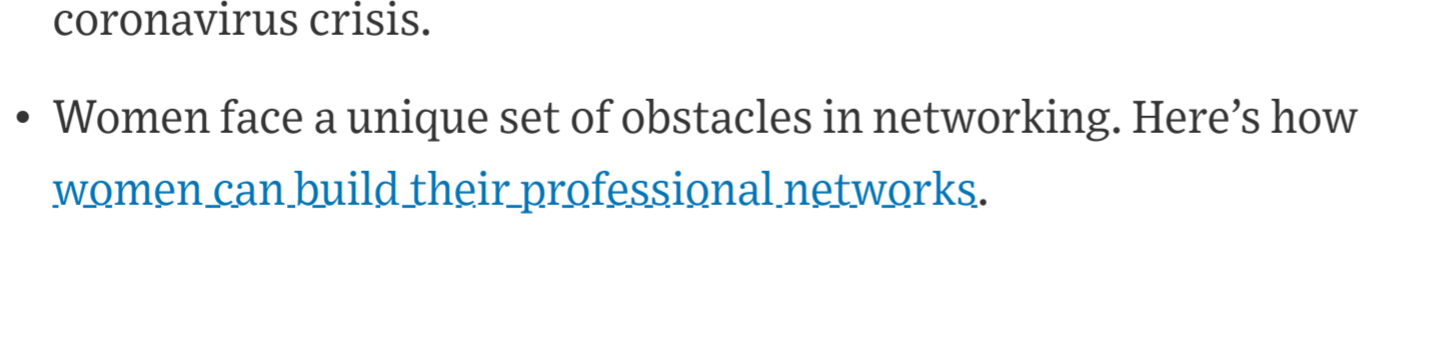
"Having not done any research about the person is kind of deadly because it can lead to lots of things that you can trip up on," says Ms. Sample. "You come in with the questions and you've done your research about them and they'll be very impressed."

Resources

- **Donut.** This Slack app introduces employees from different teams and makes it easy to set up virtual or in-person coffee meetings. It even has a feature that can randomly select somebody for a coffee with the company's CEO.
- **World Time Buddy.** Want to arrange a meeting with colleagues in different parts of the world? This digital meeting scheduler can simultaneously display everyone's time zones and export meetings to Google or Outlook Calendars.
- **AirTable.** Keep track of everybody's projects and their progress.

What to do next

- Watch this CEO's [top five tips for becoming a better networker](#), even if you are an introvert.
- Read some tips and tricks on [how to be a good colleague](#) during the coronavirus crisis.
- Women face a unique set of obstacles in networking. Here's how [women can build their professional networks](#).



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