

How can women build high-status networks?

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New research from ESMT Berlin finds that men are more likely to leverage co-location and face-to-face interactions to build high-status connections. Women, by contrast, are more effective at connecting with high-status colleagues via third-party ties.

These findings come from research by Gianluca Carnabuci, professor of organizational behavior at ESMT Berlin, who—alongside his colleagues Carla Rua-Gomez from Skema Business School and Martin C. Goossen from Old Dominion University—explored the impact of gender when it comes to building high-status networks in the workplace.

Previous research had shown that it is harder for women to gain access to their organization's high-status networks, which is consequential because high-status connections can boost one's performance and career outcomes. What prior research did not tell us, however, is which factors might help women build high-status connections.

To address this question, the researchers collected data on how people formed collaboration ties within the R&D laboratories of the 42 largest pharmaceutical companies over a 25-year period (1985–2010). Through this large-scale data set, they studied who succeeded at entering the collaboration network of the highest-status colleagues in their lab (the lab's "star" scientists), and how they did so.

They found that there are two key pathways—geographic and network proximity—through which R&D scientists build ties with star colleagues. Geographic proximity means that someone works in the same geographic location as the star scientist, making it possible to interact face to face.

Network proximity means being indirectly connected to the star scientist via a third party who can introduce, refer to, or vouch for you. While geographic and [network](#) proximity are useful for both men and women, the researchers found that gender determines which of the two works best.

Being in the same [geographical location](#) as the star colleague, the researchers found, is most beneficial for men because high-status actors

tend to infer a colleague's competence from stereotypically masculine signals, such as assertiveness and self-confidence, which are particularly salient in face-to-face interactions.

By contrast, women are particularly effective at building high-status connections through the support of third-party ties because such indirect connections are a powerful means to counteract generalized [gender stereotypes](#) and highlight women's distinctive strengths.

"There has long been the notion of the 'old boys' club' in many organizations and contexts. It is a fact that networks at the highest level are predominantly male, and for women it is very difficult to break into these networks. Yet building networks is a more nuanced process than most people think, and our research shows that women and men are most successful when using different approaches," says Professor Carnabuci.

This research highlights the differing challenges and opportunities that men and women face when it comes to building workplace networks. A key insight is that to create a more inclusive environment where all employees have [equal opportunities](#) to access high-status networks, organizations should design different support approaches for women and men.

While it is harder for women than it is for men to connect with high-status colleagues working in the same location, women are much better than men at connecting with high-status colleagues via third-party ties. This finding highlights the importance of designing interventions, such as mentorship programs, specifically aimed at building third-party ties between low-status women and high-status colleagues.

This research was published in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

More information: Carla Rua-Gomez et al, Reaching for the Stars:

How Gender Influences the Formation of High-Status Collaboration Ties, *Academy of Management Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2021.0218](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2021.0218)

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