

# Networking: An opportunity or an obstacle for women?

March 11 2024, by Miryam Martinez Martinez, Gabriela Contreras and Susana González Pérez

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Networking can help to [build and improve](#) informal working relationships. When done right, it can be a mutually beneficial exchange among [individuals or groups](#), often leading to new opportunities or even promotions, making it a fundamental ingredient of professional success.

However, despite its [widely recognized benefits](#), people can often feel uncomfortable or insincere when networking, and do not find it necessary or effective.

Understanding and confronting the challenges of networking is a crucial part of preventing talent loss, and of creating an equitable working environment.

## **Women and networking**

The need for creating and expanding professional networks is especially pronounced for women, who are less represented than men in leadership roles, and often have to work harder to get noticed and advance in their careers.

In 2020, women occupied less than 30% of the highest ranking positions across the world, and [it has been predicted](#) that gender equality in management will not be reached for another century. Studies have shown that this gap cannot be exclusively attributed to [women's lack of training or ambition](#): the gender dynamics of networking play an important role.

[A great deal of research](#) from the 1990s and early 2000s has shown that women frequently find themselves excluded from [informal networks](#), which are [mostly the domain of men](#). Family responsibilities place further limits on women's ability to take part in networking events outside of the regular working day. While men might share these

responsibilities, they are much more likely to affect women.

[Our study](#) asks the question of whether the gendered impact of networking continues to fuel the gender gap in [senior management](#), despite the [cultural changes](#), policies of inclusion, diversity, equality and gender quotas that have emerged since earlier studies.

## **How networking affects careers**

In our research, we analyzed the experiences of 901 managers and executives (both male and female), with the aim of looking closely at the different impacts of networking on men's and women's careers. Data was gathered via an [online survey](#), and included questions on networking habits ([using the Forret and Dougherty scale](#)), as well as questions on [career](#) achievements such as promotions and raises.

The study confirmed a positive correlation between networking activities and professional success among both men and women. However, this general trend belies the fact that, for women, some networking practices may be more effective than others.

## **A double-edged sword**

For women, networking is a double-edged sword, in that it can present both opportunities and obstacles to career progression. In particular, our results showed that women who strive to get noticed by taking on project [leadership roles](#) may actually be penalized in their long term career development, unlike their male counterparts. This disparity stems from entrenched [gender](#) norms and [social expectations](#) surrounding networking and social behavior.

Women, often constrained by [traditional gender roles](#), may find success

in fostering professional relationships through informal channels, thus aligning themselves with social expectations of cooperation, care and socialization. However, attempts to assert themselves through proactive action may have adverse consequences, as they risk being perceived as too aggressive or ambitious. This, in turn, can lead to dissatisfaction if it is not reflected in recognition or career advancement.

Our results highlight the need for companies to create an equitable working culture, where success is defined by talent and merit alone, and not by who gets noticed. In such an environment, qualified women would not miss out on being deservedly promoted or rewarded, which can result in feelings of discouragement and, ultimately, the loss of significant talent from a company.

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