



Networking In Our Virtual World

by **Kate Harry Shipham**

The words ‘networking’ and ‘virtual’ have never really gone together, until 2020. Networking typically evokes thoughts of an in-person meeting, with each person listening, learning and sharing insights and experiences within their common industry. The in-person format was always critical to this experience being a valuable use of our time. Or, so we thought.

Most of us are still working virtually, which means everything else related to our working lives is also now in virtual form, which was forced upon us only a short nine months ago.

The impact this has on the networking piece of our working lives is significant. This article will provide you with insights on what virtual networking looks like, how to appropriately and effectively embark on nurturing and engaging with your network solely on a virtual platform, and some common missteps to avoid.

What does virtual networking look like?

HOW DID YOU NETWORK PRE-COVID?

Everyone has their own comfort level around how and when they network. Think about how you

networked pre-Covid: you would have dedicated a certain amount of time, you would have had a certain level of visibility in your industry and market, and you would have had your preferred type of networking (one end of the spectrum is one-on-one coffees, the other end of the spectrum is happy hours and industry events attended by hundreds of other like-minded people).

WHAT DOES VIRTUAL NETWORKING LOOK LIKE?

Networking virtually actually follows a similar process. My personal view is that LinkedIn is your best friend for the foreseeable future to leverage the best networking experience. It's the only online platform which is dedicated to everyone in their professional lives only. Additionally, the functionality of LinkedIn makes it almost too easy, along with it being an incredibly secure platform.

PUTTING THIS INTO ACTION:

- **What is your cadence?** Establish your own unique best practice to actively network on LinkedIn. Due to the size of LinkedIn, if you just 'pop in and out' it can feel disjointed, impersonal and overwhelming.

On the other hand, if you make a dedicated effort to do, for example, 10 minutes a day, 1 hour a week, or simply every morning while you are having your coffee, it becomes a pattern and you will feel engaged and purposeful in your networking.

- **How will you engage?** Will your main type of engagement be to share industry-relevant articles and contributions with your greater network? Or, will it be to educate your network through your own thought leadership? Perhaps a more passive approach is more your style and you simply wish to re-share or comment on what your network is doing. Or, you can use LinkedIn to call out great team member contributions, introduce and connect like-minded people, seek out new prospects, monitor activity in a particular space... that is the beauty of LinkedIn as a virtual networking platform, the possibilities are literally endless. Don't try to do all of these things. Pick one or two that work with your comfort level and style (think about what you did pre-Covid

in a networking situation) and replicate that online.

- **Creativity is the base level.** Being creative in how, when and with what purpose you have is an absolute must when reaching online to either an individual or a group. Everyone is beyond busy. Everyone has limited time. Most are struggling with work and personal boundaries given the virtual environment. Make it easy for them. A short, engaging – and, this is the kicker – meaningful and personal note or connection is the base line right now.

Putting this into action:

EXAMPLES OF HIGH-QUALITY AND MEANINGFUL VIRTUAL NETWORKING

- Reach out to a professional peer and schedule in a 20-minute morning coffee before the day gets too busy; share something you've learned in recent months and ask how that person is doing given all of the circumstances currently

- Organize a 30-minute evening happy hour with the peers in your industry that you would ordinarily see at an event (think of those you enjoyed catching up with at an ILTA event); provide an overarching question or challenge to give it meaning if you wish
- Aim to connect with three people in your industry each week
- Organize a Zoom meeting with a small group of trusted peers with a purpose: “I’m struggling with this...”, “I’ve noticed that...”, “I’m trying to achieve this...”; or, simply set a topic or subject you wish to learn and share on as the agenda for the meeting
- Re-share thoughtfully; acknowledge who put up the content and why you found it relevant; these quick takeaways are beneficial in our ever-busy world
- Start a professional book club or ‘monthly topic’; people have limited spare time, but reading and sharing on one topic of interest

is often far easier (and often more engaging and relevant)

- Initiate a ‘lessons learned’ catch up; this can be with your team, with peers, or with people who want to learn from or engage with
- Note the articles you read and the places where you go to in order to seek out industry updates; share these meaningfully and pull out the key pieces; you can even forward these to specific individuals who would benefit
- Comment on peoples’ job anniversary’s, volunteer roles and other similar milestones; these are important to each of us
- Look for groups on LinkedIn to enhance your own professional development; there are literally far too many to mention, so a tailored search is a must (or, start your own group)
- Form your own special interest group, for example, ‘small firm legal technologists’

- Last but definitely not least, simply reach out and say hi to someone in your network that you haven’t come across in a while; ask them how they are doing with everything; these more personal one-on-one connections can never be underestimated

Virtual networking ‘misses’

Our online presence – whether its professional or personal – will stick with us for some time, if not forever. This means we all need to be mindful and considerate when we’re virtual. Being flippant, abrupt or vague creates the wrong impression, and typically one that you can’t explain away.

HERE ARE THE TOP MISSES OF VIRTUAL NETWORKING:

- **The pleasant but elusive connection request.** Sending a connection request with “we are both within the same industry and so I thought we should connect” might have seemed like a good idea for the person initiating the connection. But, what about for the person receiving the connection? Why and how does it benefit them? Professional virtual

networking needs to be purposeful, specific and mutually beneficial.

- **Keep the focus on your network for the most part.** When networking in person, many of us subtly move away from the “its all about me” person. Networking virtually is no exception to this.
- **Quality over quantity.** Cull your connections and figure out who you want in your network and why. Its not a competition to have the most amount of connections. It’s about meaningful connections that are mutually beneficial for the long-term.
- **Have a differing opinion, but be respectful.** It is far easier to say something we perhaps otherwise wouldn’t when we don’t have to see the person’s face when delivering that message. If you wouldn’t say it face-to-face, don’t say it virtually. Commenting on others’ work or thoughts should always be in a robust and respectful back-and-forth.

Summing up

Virtually networking will be the way to engage with our professional peers – not to mention our clients – for the foreseeable future. Lean in to the moment and challenge yourself to make it personal, thoughtful and with a frequency that gives you good visibility and the reputation as a leader in your field. **ILTA**



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