

LAB REPORT

AN IRON LIGHT LABS PRODUCT

Networking: How Good Ideas Get Adopted

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CHAZ CIRAME
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Executive Summary

*"HOW DO GOOD IDEAS GET OUT?
THIS IS GOING TO COME AS A SHOCKER...
YOU TELL YOUR NETWORK ABOUT THEM."*

You could just post your work online and wait for the praise to pour in, but that's unrealistic and ineffective. If you genuinely want to make an impact, you have to put in the time and effort to build a network of folks interested in you and your work— and then meet them face to face. They may even be able to help you take your work to the next level and provide you opportunities to speak at conferences, in the media, find new donors to support your work and even work with policy makers to make them law.

In this Lab Report, you will find a combination of actionable advice on how to utilize networking and the power of digital to build real community both on and offline. We will take a look at why networking is important and share tips that will make you a Super Connector in no time.

We will also dig deep into a case study of Rules of Networking. We will examine how we built a sizable, sustaining, community of over five thousand people across platforms; we will examine the special ways the platform empowers peoples' professional online and offline success.

Why Networking?

It happens every day. Some of the most brilliant people I know—people with ideas, research, and data capable of changing the world—fail to share their knowledge and expertise in a meaningful way.

All too often, policy ideas and stories sit buried in static places—files, white papers, on a website page, or in unread “must-read” lists. Does this sound familiar? If so, it's time to take an active role in sharing your work and your stories with others in ways that are mutually beneficial and set you up for success.

Research supports this as well. Dr. Ron Burt at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, who's considered to be one of the world's top network scientists, produced a study that suggests having a large, open network with people from different groups is the number one indicator of professional success. Having a large, diverse network leads to quicker promotion, higher compensation, and industry recognition and perhaps surprisingly even better outcomes on employee reviews.



Learning to be a better networker is in your best personal interest and is a skill that is worth refining, if not mastering.

“Regardless of your personality type, you should work to develop your people skills in the same way you would practice for a media interview or learn to communicate your policy research in writing,” said New America President Anne-Marie Slaughter. Think of “networking” as weaving a web of connections that will enable you to help others and them to help you.”

The good news is that policy experts may already be uniquely equipped to excel at networking. In a LinkedIn post titled “Networking for those who hate networking,” organizational psychologist Adam Grant discusses how mastering your craft can help build connections. He asserts that “having expertise to share sets you up to meet interesting people.”

Put another way, when you are passionate and educated on a specific issue, other people will be drawn to that. Policy professionals can leverage all those research studies and opinion pieces to catch the attention of others who will appreciate your expertise and want to stay connected to you as a valuable information source. It’s also a great start in cultivating a long-term relationship based on mutual interest.



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Actionable Advice for the Individual

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1 BUILD YOUR LIST



You know influential people in your line of work. Make a list and start reaching out to them. Email them, make a LinkedIn connection, ask for an introduction from a friend or colleague, or make a call (yes, calling gets someone's attention). As you connect and meet new people, ask them who they think you should meet. Add them to your list and reach out to them.

2 CONNECTING WITH SUPER CONNECTORS



One advantage that policy people have in building their networks is the policy world is full of Super Connectors.

Do you know someone who seems to know everyone? These individuals already have an extensive network and are inclined to make connections. If they don't see a person, they know who to call to make an introduction. Keith Ferrazzi, author of the best-selling networking book *Never Eat Alone*, says to start by connecting with the connectors. He says, "You'll find many Super Connectors as headhunters, lobbyists, fundraisers, politicians, journalists, and public relations specialists because such positions require these folks' innate abilities." Super Connectors are the best first stop on your networking journey.

3 GET OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE



Don't just network with peers. The people with the most professional success have large, diverse networks; they are hubs to many different communities. Find people unlike you— people who are further along in their career, from another political party, industry, or even a foreign country. You will find out that you have more in common than you think. Numerous studies have found that even talking to strangers makes YOU happier.

4 REMEMBER NAMES



“A person's name is to him or her the sweetest and most important sound in any language.” – Dale Carnegie

Remembering names is a skill, but it is also a muscle that can be strengthened with practice. There are a few proven methods, but the easiest one is to repeat a person's name when you are first introduced— both for memorization and clarification to make sure you heard right. Try to repeat their name during the conversation and close by saying their name when you say goodbye. If you follow up with them the next day, their name should be sealed in your mind.

5 BE AUTHENTIC



Talking about your issue-related work should come naturally to you and is an easy place to start at a professional networking event— it sure beats talking about the weather. However avoid being transactional or making feel like they are being sold, tak the time to learn about peoples interest, who they are , what are their goals, find ways you can help them. No one wants to feel like they are being interviewed for their utility. If both people end up adding value to each other's future work efforts, that's a networking win! But you should never have a “what can you do for me?” attitude going into a first-time conversation.

6 LISTEN



Conversing is best when you're a curious and open-minded listener. It's refreshing and will lead to a transition to new topics, deeper discussion, and be given the opportunity to open up their network to you. Ask the person about their life, what books they are reading, where they grew up, and what energizes them. Take a break and enjoy learning about someone new.

7 FOLLOW UP



This is how you will move from a novice to an elite networking ninja! Face-to-face connection (even virtually if need be) can lead to unexpected and extraordinary things, like book contracts, speaking opportunities, and even job offers. But most people are bad with following up after their initial connections; they intend to reach out, but life gets busy. They get caught up in a new project or an urgent work task and fail to follow through— this is an opportunity for you to stand out. When you close out a conversation with someone, set the expectation that you will be following up with them. Make sure the follow-up is in your court; remember, most people are bad at follow-up, and leaving it up to the other person is a recipe for failure. The next day, or on your way back from the meeting, send them a short thank-you note. Provide a recap of what you discussed, your shared alignment, and the actionable follow-up.

In a survey by Careerbuilder.com, 57 percent of job interviewees do not send a thank-you note after a job interview. In another study by recruiting and staffing firm Robert Half, 80 percent of hiring managers find them helpful.

Networking takes effort for sure. But the rewards are great for you, your work, and those in your network. In the previously mentioned article, Adam Grant interviews Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn, about the importance of connecting with people over something deeper than self-interest. Reid said, “At the highest level, the goal is to help people because that’s a value of yours— or because you believe in them and their values.”

8 LEVERAGING NETWORK EFFECTS



Network effects have enormous potential to shape individual lives. But can we also draw lessons from network effects and the tech world for policy change? One of our best recent and relatable examples of networking scalability is the case of Zoom. Before the pandemic, Zoom was dozens of significant and thousands of smaller players providing video conferencing. However, during the pandemic, Zoom took off and scaled to unimaginable size because its product was accessible (free under 40 minutes and productivity software agnostic) and adoptable (user-friendly interface).

9 BE LIKE ZOOM; MAKE YOUR POLICY IDEAS ACCESSIBLE AND ADOPTABLE:



Accessible—Gated communities have their benefit, but if you are trying to reach the masses, paywalls are a hard battle. The Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) saw an exponential increase in its reach after adopting a creative commons license for all of its writings.

Adoptable —Model legislation is a perfect example of a policy that can take a life of its own if it is adoptable. In the late 2000s, the American Legislative Exchange Council and others created and promoted model legislation to put state checkbooks and spend information online; the Taxpayer Transparency Acts are now law in more than thirty-four states, and almost all states have now enacted through a statute or executive action some form of searchable online budget transparency within a few short years of its conception.

Our case study below exemplifies the ability of an accessible and adoptable tech network to empower individual networking—and gives a glimpse of the greater change that empowered people and their networks can bring about.

10 CASE STUDY: RULES OF NETWORKING



What does it look like when individuals take ownership of their networking by connecting with a platform that successfully leverages network effects for the benefit of its members? Let's take a look at Rules of Networking to find out.

I had become discouraged in my job search; the advice and opportunities I was able to get through Rules of Networking helped me secure a fantastic job in my career field. I was quickly promoted to Chief of Staff to the CEO. Now my employer is helping me go to law school at night.

--Michael De Robbio, Olympic Media (need to secure approval)

Rules of Networking is a professional development platform designed to provide members with a collaborative community to support them in their career journey. While both founders have deeply political backgrounds, they saw Rules of Networking (RoN) as an opportunity to do something bigger—bring an increasingly fractured world closer together, and help people thrive professionally while having fun.

From its roots in Arlington, VA, RoN has grown into an extensive network, with members hailing from forty-six countries and engaging in a variety of ways. Seven hundred members have connected through the LinkedIn group, and over four thousand members have connected through the private Facebook group. Engagement in the Facebook group is particularly lively; in the last year, nearly 2,200 posts generated 13,450 comments and 55,158 reactions. The platform recently launched RulesOfNetworking.com—though the site is still in beta, it already boasts over 500 members and has listed over 750 job opportunities. RoN makes good on its tagline—Events, Advice, Jobs, and Fun—by reaching beyond social media and offering real-world opportunities to connect and excel. This case study examines how Rules of Networking built its success and empowers its members to build theirs.

11 LAY A FOUNDATION



Like many people over the last few years, we joined numerous new online groups during covid, especially early on when we were all desperately seeking connections. But regardless of the subject, from foodie groups to cocktails to comedy, all of these groups devolve into political debate. Moderators struggle to reset discussion and tone, and groups lose their charm and engagement quickly. Rules of Networking has sidestepped this pitfall by making our #1 Rule a politics-free zone. This is our best and most important rule; if you are building political communities on the internet, you probably can't utilize it to the max, but we think there are underpinnings you can integrate. In any forum—whether political or politics-free—the key is to mindfully steer the conversation by introducing and encouraging content that will help steer the conversation to be a health and productive one, not a devolving into a comments section madness, that plagues many forums.

Rules of Networking operates under ten basic rules that have served us well; many of them are hyper-specific to our audience and mission; others are pretty universal and could be used or adapted by many groups.

Rules of Networking isn't a political forum; it's a professional development platform that invites all walks of political ideologies. This is our best and most important rule; if you are building political communities on the internet, you probably can't utilize it to the max, but we think there are underpinnings you can integrate. Having started in Washington D.C., our group is full of current and former campaign operatives, Capitol Hill staff, etc.—political animals—however, despite that, people of differing political parties and ideologies find a way to break bread and help each other with their professional development.

12

STEER THE CONVERSATIONS



Model the discussion you want to encourage by sharing content and asking questions that will elicit the type of conversation you would like to have.

Even political people are more interesting than their politics. If your group is politically focused, you can still find ways to keep it positive; negative engagement is a turn-off for the silent majority of users. One way that RoN creates routine engagement and positive content is through a weekly “Members on the Move” post, which highlights members’ new jobs, new promotions, new projects, and new puppies. This content communicates and celebrates individual members success and miles stones. It allows other members to rea

Controversial topics will raise engagement immediately but will hurt overall engagement over time. Be wary of bomb-throwers. The RoN community is largely self correcting when someone makes a bomb throwing comment, users call out such behavior but also if the content violates the rules in spirit or practice the content is deleted

13

A PLATFORM FOR EVERYONE



One of the most indemand services of Iron Light is owned audience building. Iron Light extends to its own clients the ability to reach their own audience without relying on platform operators and gatekeepers.

While Facebook and LinkedIn groups like Rules of Networking get fantastic high levels of engagement and viral visibility inside of their group membership, they don't replace being able to engage your audience when and however you want to.

To own and engage our audience on our terms, when and how we want, is in part why we have launched <https://beta.rulesofnetworking.com>, where we are working on adding significant value for members that may not use Facebook or prefer other platforms; it also gives us the opportunity to roll out unique features and benefits like our job board and member profiles that we couldn't offer inside the Facebook group.

14 BRINGING THE POWER OF OFFLINE ONLINE



One of the key parts of the Rules of Networking experience is it is a very human one and a universal shared experience; in a world with decreasing shared experiences, everyone has struggled through career challenges, from getting hired to getting fired to asking for a raise. Early on in building the community, we started posting RoNoymous questions, where group members could post anonymous questions, and then other group members could share their experiences and advice. (Now, Facebook enables asking anonymous questions with moderator pre-approval.) We get questions ranging from the basic when and how I should follow up to the complicated and personal how I should come out in the workplace. The group has always managed to provide top-notch advice and experience to share with the people asking questions. (Now, Facebook enables asking anonymous questions with moderator pre-approval.)

When covid forced much of the professional world to shift offline functions to an online format, many traditional networking spaces went dark. In-person events were summarily canceled, work-from-home was mandated for many, and even small gatherings around the watercooler were deemed off-limits for those who still reported to the office. Far from going dark, RoN pivoted to total virtual, becoming a virtual watercooler and third professional space. Members turned to RoN with questions they had never had to consider before. Discussions ranged from demystifying home office products like ring lighting to advice on how to prepare for a Zoom interview. With traditional networking shuttered, Rules of Networking stepped in and helped Spring 2020 college graduates find jobs. By bringing the power of offline online, RoN offered members a much-needed source of support and collaboration to help see them through trying times.

Conclusion



Networking is so much more than attending the occasional event, or passively observing an online group dedicated to your field. Truly tapping into the potential of networking requires actively establishing and maintaining a large, open network—this is demonstrated by the laws of network effects and played out in the successes achieved by Rules of Networking and its members. Communities of connected people with great ideas have great potential for change; that change can be helping one person find a new job or a policy change that affects millions.

I hope you start your own network and I look forward to an invite!

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ABOUT



Iron Light Labs is an award-winning nonprofit focused on R&D for social impact. We are called “Labs” because we experiment, innovate and test to discover the best way to drive change. We are building a future where storytellers leap out of the echo chamber, creators partner with effective messengers, changemakers experiment with emerging media, and everyone measures what matters.

ABOUT

CHAZ CIRAME

Chaz is an expert on building professional relationships and networks. Chaz is a serial entrepreneur whose work includes founding the executive recruiting firm Big Fish, serving as senior advisor to the creative marketing firm Iron Light, and serving as president of Cc: External Affairs, Inc. He also is the co-founder and co-host of the 5,000-member strong professional networking community Rules of Networking. Chaz is one of the nation’s foremost experts on how NGOs, influencers, and relationships affect public policy. Chaz has more than 20 years of experience building relationships, from his start working in the Maine State Senate to working in senior fundraising, membership, public affairs, and MARCOM roles. Chaz has worked with legislators in Congress in all 50 states, and his clients have included UPS, Amazon Web Services, the National Association of Broadcasters, and the DCI Group. He is a past president of the Washington Area State Relations Group, an association of D.C.-based state government affairs professionals. He also serves as Treasurer of the board of directors of the national non-profit: America’s Future.