Networking

For many of us, the world changed just over two years ago. You may have left work one March afternoon under the false pretense of a two-week work-from-home "vacation" to comply with the government's "15 Days to Slow the Spread" Covid-19 campaign, and today you still work from your home office over Zoom. Working from home may have seemed great at the time: no more long commutes or uncomfortable suits. However, you probably have found that your dog is not the ideal colleague! One of the greatest obstacles of working remotely is the lack of human interaction. Bumping into a colleague in the hallway helps form a sense of community within the organization and easy access to peers facilitates a team's creativity and productivity. These human interactions also promote networking, the utility of which may be more important than it first appears.

An employee can network both externally and internally. When most people think about networking, they immediately focus on external networking, which is when you reach out to someone at another company or organization. External networking provides many benefits: you gain expertise as you build relationships with more senior people or peers in the same field; you find additional contacts who can support your clients; you establish your reputation as a distinguished member of your field. External networking is also important when trying to find a position at a new company. While contemplating transition, those who have committed themselves to external networking in the past may have better luck finding a position at a new company since you are a known entity. With each professional relationship you form, you have created another person who will be able to vouch for your skills and ability.

Although there are obvious benefits to external networking, networking internally is discussed less, but is equally as important. Internal networking, often done subconsciously, occurs when you create relationships with other members of your company or organization. Examples include when you bump into someone in the hall and ask about their weekend plans or when you volunteer to pick up someone's copies from the printer. It is the seemingly little things that make someone see you as friendly, engaged, and helpful. Beyond just encouraging a more pleasant and collaborative working environment, internal networking provides other important benefits. By actively working to build relationships with your colleagues, you will be more likely chosen for new projects, receive help from other employees, and find more opportunities to get mentored.

However, we have seen a sharp decline in networking given the remote environment experience by many professionals over the past two years. From a Group 360 study of 238 individuals, we found that there has been an average 62% decrease in the hours per week an in-seat employee networked internally and a 71.7% decrease in the hours per week an in-seat employee networked externally this past year from the year prior. This decline in networking is even more pronounced for women. Before the pandemic, womens' levels of networking (9 hours per week for an in-seat individual) were significantly lower than men's (16 hours per week for an in-seat individual). Although the drop in percentage for both men and women were nearly the same, since women networked fewer hours to begin with, this drop was even more detrimental. Over the past

year, women on average spent only about 3 hours per week networking compared to their male counterparts who spent about 5.5 hours per week networking. Additionally, of the men Group 360 surveyed, the primary reason they gave for lower levels of networking was a significant drop in people reaching out to them. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for women in any field to make time to reach out to internal and external contacts. Additionally, women also indicated they spent less time networking this past year because they spent more time on traditional household activities. In a remote setting, more women than men indicated they are more likely to use breaks to care for their children versus using that time to network. Being a caretaker is a vital position, so employers should make sure to create time for all of their employees to be able to network during the workday. As people continue to go back to in-person jobs, women must prioritize networking.

The shocking reduction of networking this past year reveals a real deficit of the remote working model. Group360 wants to offer a few ideas to encourage more networking. First, as it becomes safe to return to work, some employees will continue to work from home exclusively out of ease. If this is the case, these employees should be asked to consider the value of a hybrid model in order to increase opportunities to internally network. Additionally, employees need dedicated time to be able to network with others both internally and externally. Managers should view this as a valuable exercise and encourage employees to take advantage of these opportunities. One-way managers can facilitate this activity is by setting up one-on-one meetings with employees to get to know more about their specific experience with the job and by quantifying, when possible, how much time employees dedicate towards networking. Leaders should encourage employees to regularly meet with people on different teams, which will increase collaboration and allow good ideas to spread throughout the organization. Furthermore, companies should praise employees who utilize their internal networks to support one another through visible recognition, bonuses and promotions. This will reinforce the message that networking is a valuable skill that results in greater visibility rather than an uncompensated waste of time. It goes without saying that if an employee is encouraged, they likely will be more satisfied with their work, and they will continue to utilize and have the skill.

As more adults feel comfortable returning to in-person interactions, more people will be able to return to a more traditional work schedule and environment; however, the past two years have shown us how easily people can adjust to work remotely. If people continue to work from home, companies will need to continue to find new ways to connect their employees and encourage networking. Although a remote environment does have some negative effects on networking, it can also have some positive effects. Zoom and other internet-based meeting platforms will be used more often to connect people around the globe. People from different countries can share innovative ideas, which will benefit everyone, as technology increases and the normal workday continues to change, people will still need to find new ways to stay connected and network.