

## 3 lessons coronavirus can teach us about virtual networking



### **Written by**

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## **How to replicate the corridor conversation and coffee time chat when working from home**

Despite immense advances in online communication in recent years, a significant amount of our day-to-day interactions in the workplace still occur face-to-face. Think of the quick catchups with colleagues around the coffee machine, or a spontaneous chat in the corridor.

These face-to-face interactions are a key ingredient of healthy office life. They prompt us to think about how we can help others navigate challenges in their work.

Now that regular office life has virtually ground to a halt with the spread of coronavirus, we find ourselves asking what we can do to keep the office community spirit alive in an online context.

Here are some ideas for new networking habits we should develop to enable us to continue contributing to each other's work in organic and spontaneous ways, which will remain valuable even when things return to normal. Times of crisis are tremendously difficult, yet at the same time, they can be an opportunity to improve life in the long run.

### **1. Signal your availability**

In the office we intuitively understand when a colleague is available for a chat, but in an online context it is much more difficult to know whether or not we're disturbing someone.

Signalling your availability is key so that colleagues feel they can still ask for your help. One senior IBM manager I interviewed years ago said he would normally frontload all his "own" work in the morning, enabling him to keep much of his afternoon free to help his colleagues. Although it may be rare for people to be that generous, he simply saw it as his duty given his level of seniority to be there for others, to share his rich experience in problem-solving, or to sponsor new and important initiatives of junior colleagues.

Now that so many of us work from home, make it a habit to carefully manage your availability status online. Let close colleagues – especially those who depend on you – know in a personal message where, when and how to approach you.

We are all busy, and perhaps the coronavirus crisis puts things in perspective. Maybe we can slow down a bit and make time in our schedules for people to come and talk to us. Being generous with help and signalling our availability are cornerstones of healthy office culture, online and on-site.

## **2. Check in with two colleagues a day**

A coffee conversation – or preferably a lunch break – is normally one of those moments where we can check in with our colleagues.

Often without realising, these spontaneous exchanges bring unanticipated benefits. A colleague may inadvertently provide inspiration for a new idea, and little nuggets of ideas may spark and point you in new directions.

A senior executive in a large technology-based multinational mentioned she would take ten minutes each day to send a personalised message to a colleague she hadn't spoken to for a while. Often she'd send an article that she thought could be relevant to them or a small note to congratulate them on a recent achievement. It is little to no effort, but more often than not she said it sparked meaningful exchanges afterwards. Make it a habit to check in with two colleagues a day and chances are it will make a meaningful difference to their day, and to your social capital in the organisation.

## **3. Ask for help**

Helping others is a critical part of office life. Yet all too often we fall into the trap of being generous with help to others, without giving others the opportunity to help us.

In the office, subtle emotions and body language often hint at underlying problems and worries – small or big – which may prompt colleagues to check in with you. But not in the online office.

In my class on networking for [MBA students](#), I use an exercise called the Reciprocity Ring. In the exercise students are asked to publicly make a request for help to the whole group. It is remarkable to see how generous people are with helping others and the exercise goes to show that even thorny problems can be effectively solved with the help of others. Broadcasting requests for help to a small group willing to help each other may also prompt referrals to wider networks.

How then can you broadcast your request effectively? One way is through the use of internal messaging boards or online forums. But it could be even more powerful to make a brief request in an online meeting. In a healthy online office, doing so will not only pay off, but may also set a good precedent for others to follow suit and avoid struggling in isolation.

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## **About Anne ter Wal**

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Anne ter Wal joined Imperial College Business School in 2009 and is Associate Professor of Technology & Innovation Management. His research, often in collaboration with leading multinational companies, focuses on the role of networks in innovation and entrepreneurship. In his research, Anne studies how individuals access new knowledge and ideas through networks within and between organisations. He also looks at the challenges they face when seeking to apply these ideas to the creation of novel products and services. He leads a large-scale EU-funded research project studying how entrepreneurs build valuable networks that help them achieve business and innovation success.

Prior to joining Imperial College London, Anne was a doctoral researcher at the Section of Economic Geography at Utrecht University. His work has been published in leading journals in management, innovation studies and economic geography, including the Administrative Science Quarterly, Organization Science, the California Management Review, the Journal of Product Innovation Management, Research Policy, and the Journal of Economic Geography and Economic Geography.

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