

A Special Feature Presented by SMU Executive Development



It's About the Network, Not the Technology

Singapore Management University's Steve Wyatt describes how an executive's network is unique to him/her and how it can be actively cultivated to accelerate the personal learning and development journey.

We live in a networked age.

If you were to pick up nearly any popular business publication, you would likely come across authors writing about information. The common assertion is that we live in an information age. Gurus would have us profit by harnessing information via technology. No doubt, there are massive opportunities in data.

So why does it matter to executive development whether we live in an information or networked age? The answer may surprise you.

First, and to be clear, we live in a networked age.

This point was made nearly 20 years ago by famed sociologist Manuel Castells. He reminded us that every human society has had its stories, rituals, and language – in short, information. Therefore, having information, or a lot of it, is not the distinguishing characteristic of the current age. Both ancient Athens and the Enlightenment saw explosions of information.

Networks, their cultivation and the resulting empowerment defines the current age.

For the first time in human history, populations are now able to organise themselves into a network structure in a *sustained* way. Previously, networks were largely just ad hoc forms of organisation.

If followed to its logical end, Castells' point holds important implications for designing your Learning and Development (L&D) programmes in 2015.

What Do Networks Do Well?

Networks do several things very well.

Firstly, because of digitisation and the ubiquity of computing devices, we now have the ability to share, interact, and co-create meaningful experiences across time and international borders. To illustrate, let's perform a small mind experiment.

Think about the experience you had when reading a favourite book. Was the experience thought-provoking? Perhaps. Was it entertaining? Again, perhaps. Could you discuss the book with a colleague? Perhaps you could do so when you reach the office the next day.

And now think about an interactive online experience you had via any widely available tool such as Google+ or WebEx. Could you read and have your mind engaged? Yes. Could you discuss the ideas immediately? Yes. Did the sensory input include both audio and video and was it rich? Yes. Could decision-making be real-time via interactive white boards? Absolutely. And were you limited to the people with whom you are located in any specific office building? Absolutely not.

Now, link this thought experiment to your L&D activities.

- Due to the interactive technologies through which we network, the fundamental nature of the learning experience changes from passive to active. Instead of reading an article or reflecting in a journal, alone, executives can now be put into a buddy system and via interactive technology have a rich, engaging experience where they co-create the insights that can be applied to their businesses.

The context of professional growth is fundamentally changing, and for the better, via networks and interactive technology.

- As these networks are sustained, rather than ad hoc, learners gain greater control over the timing and context of their development activities. Executives gain, for example, the ability to choose a time that is free of other demands. Alternatively, they may also choose to work on finance issues at a time neatly aligned with financial questions raised within the office, or practise giving peer-to-peer feedback within a project group just before on-the-job performance evaluation meetings are scheduled.

- As people are networked – both digitally and in their carbon forms – we can now draw upon more resources that support the learning experience. In other words, networks are very good at expanding your resource base.

We are no longer restricted to the resources available in the physical classroom or pre-readings.

- Who in your network is unique to you, a reflection of the interests, experiences, curiosities and even dreams that you cultivate all the time? Your network grows when you give it more attention and strengthens when you invest more in it. Network relationships are an exchange, sometimes directly, often with the community of the network.

Ask yourself – In which directions are you cultivating your network to grow? What are you contributing to your network to strengthen it? What is the support you would like to receive from it?

Unique Context not Content

For the L&D team, networks can help build a better context for learning.

Today's executive programmes need not be solely or even primarily about content-enabled delivery. To be clear and not overstate the case, content is and will always be important to executive development. What a network does, however, is enable us to think outside the walls of the traditional classroom or library resources. Executive development can, via networks, move toward a more sustained *context* of interactive and engaged learning.

We call this context-enabled delivery.

The network that you build is unique. If built with care, the network is already highly customised and reflects your past experiences, current context and future aspirations. Networks can provide the rich and necessary *inputs* – the *context* – that executive learners need to accelerate their development.

SMU Executive Development enables behaviour change that improves performance. Cultivating and leveraging networks of relationships can help provide that edge your executives need.

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