

# 4

*Although the value of social capital for organization and individual career success is widely recognized, gender as a moderator in the building of social capital in organizational settings has not received adequate research attention. This chapter looks at how professional women use one aspect of social capital—networks—to assist with their career progression.*

## Networking in the Workplace: Implications for Women's Career Development

*Jia Wang*

Widely recognized as a valuable asset for creating healthy organizations (Timberlake, 2005), social capital is leveraged in the workplace for task accomplishment, career advancement, and social support (Bartol and Zhang, 2007). However, access to social capital in an organization is not always equitable (Ragins and Cotton, 1991). Literature strongly suggests that women do not have equal access to social capital because they are often excluded from the social networks most important for power acquisition and career success. Furthermore, even when women do have access to or invest time in building social networks, the return is not always desirable. This chapter examines how women form and leverage networks to gain social support for their careers. It offers implications and suggestions for organizations and professional women regarding how to create a workplace that reinforces gender equality and facilitates women's career progress.

### **Understanding Networks in Organizations**

A network is a set of actors and the set of ties representing some relationship, or lack thereof, between the actors (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, and Tsai, 2004). In organizational settings, a network usually involves contacts with a variety of colleagues for the purpose of mutual work benefits (Linehan and Scullion, 2008). It also depends on informal interactions involving favors, persuasion, and connections to people who already have influence

(Henning and Jardim, 1977). Networks are important for accomplishing tasks, gaining upward mobility, and personal and professional development (Bartol and Zhang, 2007).

**Types of Networks.** Networks can take various forms. Ehrich (1994) identified three types: formal, informal, and community-based networks. Formal networks tend to be professional organizations that require members to pay fees, receive newsletters, and usually engage in networking activities. Informal networks consist of like-minded individuals who meet irregularly to discuss issues of common interest or concerns; an example of informal networking is observed in peer mentoring relationships. Community-based networks are broadly based organizations such as church groups and other socially based clubs.

Unlike Ehrich (1994), Ibarra (1995) categorized networks in organizational settings into task networks, career networks, and friendship/social support networks. Task networks facilitate the exchange of resources aimed at accomplishing tasks, including information, expertise, materials, and task-related political access. Career networks involve relationships with actors who can facilitate career progress by giving career advice, offering mentoring and sponsorship, assisting in securing key developmental assignments, facilitating career-enhancing visibility, and engaging in advocacy for promotion. Friendship/social support networks address relationships that are based more on closeness and trust than on task-related needs. They usually evolve from common backgrounds or interests and tend to be informal and based on emergent friendships. Each type of network can be considered in terms of one-on-one interpersonal sources of development aid (dyadic ties), or the web of multiple relationships in which an individual is embedded as a set of potential developmental resources (Bartol and Zhang, 2007). Bartol and Zhang further identified the sources of development aid that match the three network types (See Table 4.1).

**Characteristics of Networks.** Because a network consists of relationships among a set of actors, it is fundamental to understand characteristics of individual actor relationships within a network, such as centrality (degree), closeness, and status. Network centrality, or the extent to which an actor is central to a network, is found to be positively related to increased

**Table 4.1. Type of Network and Sources of Development Aid**

<i>Type of Network</i>	<i>Interpersonal Aid</i>	<i>Relational Aid</i>
Task	Individual advisors	Advice networks, communities of practice
Career	Mentors	Mentors/sponsors
Friends/support	Dyadic support	System of support

Source: Adopted from Bartol and Zhang (2007).

power and promotion (Bartol and Zhang, 2007). The closer an actor is to others, the easier it is for the actor to access channels of information, establish mutual trust, and become less dependent on others. In this sense, closeness can be a source of social capital, facilitating information exchange and knowledge transfer among network members. Status or hierarchical level of network members is another important characteristic to consider. Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden (2001) found that having higher-level contacts led to greater access to information and more career sponsorship, which then translated into greater career success in terms of salary and promotion.

**Benefits of Networking.** The importance of networking as a career strategy is well documented in the research literature. Garavan, Hogan, and Cahir-O'Donnell (2003) stated that networking forms an essential dimension of organizational life, and individuals who excel at networking more likely excel in their careers compared to those who do not. Networking should have a direct positive impact on career outcomes given that the purpose of engaging in networking is to help individuals develop their social capital. A number of significant advantages afforded to individuals through networking are information exchange, collaboration, alliance development, acquisition of tacit knowledge, visibility, and support (Linehan and Scullion, 2008).

**Mentoring.** Mentoring shares some similarities to networking in that they both involve developmental relationships (Kram, 1983). However, they are different concepts. In mentoring relationships, mentors tend to present multiple roles to the protégé; in network relationships, on the other hand, there are fewer roles linking the individuals, and the relationship tends to be less intense and personal than a mentoring relationship (Forret and Dougherty, 2004). It is also argued that networking is a less powerful practice than mentoring (Ehrich, 1994). While acknowledging these differences, this chapter treats mentoring as a component of the network process.

Mentoring serves a number of functions. Kram (1983) theorized two broad categories of functions: (1) career development functions such as sponsorship, coaching, and visibility; and (2) psychological functions such as encouragement, feedback, and advice. Mentoring relationships can be formal or informal. Informal mentoring relationships develop spontaneously, whereas formal mentoring relationships develop with organizational assistance or intervention (Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Ragins and Cotton further noted that women face greater barriers to developing informal mentoring relationships than men; therefore they are more likely to seek formal mentoring relationships.

## **Women's Networking: Practices and Challenges**

Economically active females are found likely to assume more family responsibilities than their male counterparts. As a result, they tend to experience more stress and pressure associated with work-family conflict (Pillinger,

2002). This makes it more important for women than men to have psychosocial and social support (Linehan and Scullion, 2008). An accumulating body of research findings point to gender differences in forming networks, as well as discrepancies in access to and use of networks. This section discusses the nature of women's networks and challenges women face in building social networks within their organizations.

**Women's Networking Behaviors.** Forret and Dougherty (2004) defined networking behaviors as "individuals' attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career" (p. 420). Individuals engage in networking behaviors to help build multiple developmental relationships. Perhaps because of lack of access to men's networks in organizations, women have consciously established their own networks, which are more formally constructed, publicly visible, and in contrast with unconscious, informal, and private old boys' networks (Schmuck, 1986). Overall, compared to men's networks women's can be characterized by having greater homogeneity, stronger ties, smaller size, and less power.

For women, networks dominated by strong ties with support from strategic sponsors result in the greatest probability of promotion, especially to higher-level positions. This may be explained by gendered differences in socialization; that is, women tend to feel more comfortable in a small circle of friends while men are more comfortable in a less intimate, more competitive environment. Although some researchers argued the usefulness of building dense, closed networks as women usually do (Coleman, 1990), there appears to be more research evidence pointing to greater advantages of having weaker ties and larger, more diverse networks (as formed by men) because these result in greater social capital, higher salaries, more promotions, and greater career satisfaction (Granovetter, 1973; Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden, 2001).

Furthermore, women tend to join less powerful networks and build ties with individuals with lower status. A viable explanation for this is that women usually occupy lower-level positions in organizations, likely limiting their access and ability to attract powerful people as contacts (McGuire, 2000). With their low status, women tend to have a low level of network centrality, which may significantly and negatively reduce their chances for leadership development and promotion (Bartol and Zhang, 2007). Realizing the importance of social support, women have sought alternative development strategies, such as building close ties outside of their work subunit (Ibarra, 1997), to gain a higher level of support. In a study of interaction patterns of men and women in an advertising firm, Ibarra (1992) identified a differentiated networking strategy women adopted in which they relied on women for social support and friendship and used men as a source of influence and for professional advice. As a result, these women benefited from the development of greater ties to their male colleagues.

**Challenges to Women's Networking.** In the process of gaining social capital in organizations, women have consistently encountered barriers. Lacking access to networks and mentoring opportunities are two major hurdles women have to overcome.

**Lack of Access to Informal Networks.** In many organizations, the concept of network is often understood as a male club or an old boy network (Linehan and Scullion, 2008). Women have consistently reported difficulty breaking into these male-operated networks, which is one of the most frequently cited problems facing women in the workplace (Forret and Dougherty, 2004). Even when networks are available to women, they often have less time available for networking owing to additional family responsibilities (Linehan and Scullion).

**Lack of Mentoring Opportunities.** A number of researchers suggested that women need more mentoring than men to advance in the organizational hierarchy because they face more organizational, interpersonal, and individual obstacles than their male counterparts (Ragins, 1989). Tharenou's survey (2005) with 3,220 lower- and middle-level Australian employees in both public and private sectors illuminated two interesting findings. One is that mentoring and career support for the female participants increased their chance of promotion more than that of their male participants. The other finding is that psychological support did not help the female participants climb the managerial hierarchy.

Despite the well-recognized benefits from mentoring, finding mentors has been a major challenge for professional women. There are several possible reasons. First, mentorship has traditionally occurred at the discretion and interest of the mentors, who are primarily male. Male mentors tend to select male rather than female protégées because of their comfort in developing a professional and personal relationship with other males (Ragins, 1989; Ehrich, 1994). On the other hand, women seeking female mentors often find few available thanks to the absence of women in high-ranking positions who can serve in the mentor role (Ibarra, 1993; Linehan and Scullion, 2008). As a result, women do not have easy access to mentors, male or female. Finally, when a mentoring relationship is established for women, it is found to generate fewer personal and career benefits compared to those for men (Kelly, 2001).

**Outcomes of Women's Networking.** Existing theory and research on organizational influence structures suggests that women are unlikely to receive the same level of career benefits as men even for similar networking behaviors. One explanation is that men occupy more central positions in organizational networks and are perceived to be more influential, instrumental, and powerful than women (Brass, 1985). Ibarra (1992) found that education, rank, and professional activities were related to greater network centrality for men than for women. A study by Forret and Dougherty (2004) with managerial and professional employees confirmed that engaging in

networking is not as advantageous for women as it is for men. Bierema (2005) studied a failed in-company women's network and concluded that networks may serve to reproduce patriarchy, not erode it; the level of consciousness influenced network participation and commitment; and the organizational culture has an impact on network success. These findings all suggest that the outcomes of women's networks are influenced by a range of factors, some of which are simply beyond women's control (for example, structural barriers). The cumulative effect of lack of informal networks, low status, low level of centrality, and less power "restrain[s] females' intra-personal, interpersonal, and relational network formation, thereby reducing the significant opportunities for major leadership development for women" (Bartol and Zhang, 2007, p. 397).

## Implications and Recommendations

Networks have been uncritically adopted by organizations as a means to address issues of diversity and increase opportunities for women. Perhaps for this reason, a majority of women continue to be concentrated in low-opportunity positions with little access to networks and contacts that lead to power and advancement (Timberlake, 2005). Reaching gender equity in the workplace through the use of networks is far more complicated than we think. As Bierema (2005) argued, "To be effective at eroding structural inequality and creating atmospheres conducive to women requires that both networks and their organizations function with high awareness and action around issues of gendered power relations" (p. 221). In line with Bierema's thinking, this section offers some suggestions for both organizations and female professionals.

**For Organizations.** A variety of strategies have been adopted by organizations to support women at work, yet they are largely simplistic or piecemeal solutions, often overlooking some important organizational factors that affect equity. Organizations need to "implement wider and deeper change, transforming structures, processes, work practices, and mental models that perpetuate inequality" (Bilimoria, Joy, and Liang, 2008, p. 424). Here are some suggestions for improving women's career opportunities through networking and social capital resources.

**Building a Supportive Work Environment.** Organizations can be catalysts for the formation of networks. The organizational context directly affects women's network formation and structure, as well as strategies they would adopt for network development (Ibarra, 1993). It is thus important to look at organizational structure, demography, work flows and processes, organizational policies, and work assignments that may constrain women's networking. A successful case example to look at is the ADVANCE Institutional Transformation Initiative launched by the National Science Foundation in 2001, aiming at enhancing women's representation in academic

science and engineering. This initiative resulted in modified or new policies, improved structures and practices, and enhanced work climate (Bilimoria, Joy, and Liang, 2008).

**Supporting Women's Network Development Initiatives.** As ample research evidence suggested, the lack of equal access to networks in organizations may partially explain why females are still underrepresented in the top ranks of organizations (Bartol and Zhang, 2007). One solution that organizations can resort to is to sponsor women's networks. Organizations can benefit from this effort as women's programs likely enable women to build relationships and networks across functions and levels, thereby increasing the communication channels needed to get work done (Valerio, 2006). Managers can offer additional support to increase women's opportunities for networking. For example, male managers can bring female colleagues to their own managers' network inside the organization, or invite women to meetings or other social events to which they do not have easy access.

**Providing Mentoring Opportunities for Women.** Mentoring has significant implications for the advancement of female professionals (Kelly, 2001). If the position of women in organizations is to improve and women are to break the glass ceiling, then mentoring will need to move from "an idiosyncratic and elitist practice, to one which is open, non-discriminatory" (Ehrich, 1994, p. 9). Organizational leaders must ensure that mentorship be promoted as an organizational policy mechanism and that women have access to mentoring experiences equal to that of their male counterparts. A number of actions can be taken in this regard. One is to furnish male mentors with education and training that will counteract sexism and sex role stereotyping they may hold against women. Hopefully, by reflecting on their mental model male mentors will be more willing to select women as their protégées. Meanwhile, organizations must create conditions that will encourage female managers to take on the role of mentors. Empirical evidence suggests that career support for women from female mentors translates most into advancement because female protégées may gain more from being sponsored, challenged, and coached by people like themselves (Tharenou, 2005). This finding makes it even more critical for organizations to have an adequate supply of female mentors. Incorporating mentoring into the managerial review and reward systems may be one way to motivate both males and females to take on the mentor's role. Furthermore, taking into consideration the difficulties women professionals have long experienced in seeking and securing a mentor, organizations should offer a formal mentoring program for women aspiring to higher positions. In addition to the use of traditional mentoring models, organizations can explore alternatives such as e-mentoring now that its value for the career development of professional women has been established (Headlam-Wells, Gosland, and Craig, 2005). Until mentoring becomes formalized and a part of women's professional development, they will continue to be disadvantaged by the elitist nature of traditional mentoring.

**Supplying Women with Training Opportunities.** Women's networks are not as extensive as men's, so formal training programs can be used as a way to expand women's networking opportunities. Whether the programs are internal or external, they both offer chances for women to be exposed to new knowledge and larger groups of professionals. In addition, organizations may also consider offering training that will increase women's awareness of the gendered networking differences, their own networking behaviors, and subsequent benefits and risks. The enhanced awareness may encourage women to develop wider networks of support and collaboration that are not often made a priority in women's professional lives.

**Conducting Inclusion and Gender Diversity Training.** This type of training program is particularly useful for male members of organizations because they often hold stereotypes against women professionals. Organizations must help male managers learn behaviors that include rather than exclude women. For example, implementing reverse-mentoring programs, where senior male managers are mentored by more junior females, helps men understand issues facing women and avoid making incorrect gender-role assumptions that are detrimental to women's careers. Furthermore, rewarding managerial behaviors that limit stereotyped decision making among managers is crucial, because when managerial rewards are linked to diversity training programs, the likelihood of accomplishing the diversity goals may be increased.

**For Female Professionals.** In addition to actions that organizations can take to foster a climate conducive to women's networking and career development, there are a number of actions women can take to help advance themselves. First, women must invest more time in leveraging existing network connections. This is particularly important given that access to informal networks within an organization is limited for women. Second, women must make strategic choices about which networks to build and how to build them; a considerable amount of research reveals both positive and negative impacts from having the strong, close relationships and networks that women usually form. Considering both sides, a smaller set of strong ties seems to make sense for support networks, while having broader weak-tie networks may be particularly helpful for task accomplishments and advice seeking (Bartol and Zhang, 2007). Lastly, because women are often viewed as outsiders in organizations, it becomes more essential for them than for men to acquire social capital by borrowing from a sponsor (Timberlake, 2005). Such a sponsor can be identified through networking and mentoring relationships.

## Conclusion

In many organizations, men will continue to seek to maintain their dominant status by excluding women from male networks and from the informal interactions helpful for women's career development. Women's lack of



network opportunities ultimately translates into lack of power in organizations. Therefore, it is paramount that organizations strive to remove the barriers to women's participation in networking, both formal and informal. On the other hand, professional women need to actively seek more powerful networks, which can give them greater exposure to a wider power base and access to male members who can help them in their profession. If female networks become stronger and more powerful, then more females will likely reach senior management positions (Linehan and Scullion, 2008).

As this chapter illuminates, women and men experience social networks quite differently. This points to the need for studying gender as a moderator in social network building, which has not received adequate research attention. Future research needs to go beyond simply reporting gender-based differences in network practices and probe deeper into why these patterns still hold and what implications they have for the returns of social capital (trust, psychosocial support, information acquisition). Social networking is not a gender-neutral concept in either manifestation or consequences. The consequent lack of opportunity for women is a major career liability (Kelly, 2001) and a critical contributor to the glass ceiling that has significantly prevented women from professional development. This is a reality that must be incorporated more explicitly into future research agenda and organizational practice.

## References

- Bartol, K. M., and Zhang, X. "Networks and Leadership Development: Building Linkages for Capacity Acquisition and Capital Accrual." *Human Resource Management Review*, 2007, 17, 388–401.
- Bierema, L. L. "Women's Networks: A Career Development Intervention or Impediment?" *Human Resource Development International*, 2005, 8(2), 207–224.
- Bilimoria, D., Joy, S., and Liang, X. "Breaking Barriers and Creating Inclusiveness: Lessons of Organizational Transformation to Advance Women Faculty in Academic Science and Engineering." *Human Resource Management*, 2008, 47(3), 423–441.
- Brass, D. J. "Men's and Women's Networks: A Study of Interaction Patterns and Influence in an Organization." *Academy of Management Journal*, 1985, 28, 327–343.
- Brass, D. J., Galaskiewicz, J., Greve, H., and Tsai, W. "Taking Stock of Networks and Organizations: A Multilevel Perspective." *Academy of Management Journal*, 2004, 47, 795–817.
- Coleman, J. S. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Ehrich, L. C. "Mentoring and Networking for Women Educators." *Women in Management Review*, 1994, 9(3), 4–10.
- Forret, M. L., and Dougherty, T. W. "Networking Behaviors and Career Outcomes: Differences for Men and Women?" *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 2004, 25(3), 419–437.
- Garavan, T., Hogan, C., and Cahir-O'Donnell, A. *Making Training and Development Work: A Best Practice Guide*. Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 2003.
- Granovetter, M. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology*, 1973, 78, 1360–1380.
- Headlam-Wells, J., Gosland, J., and Craig, J. "There's Magic in the Web: E-mentoring for Women's Career Development." *Career Development International*, 2005, 10(6/7), 444–485.

- Henning, M., and Jardim, A. *The Managerial Woman*. London: Pan Books, 1977.
- Hewlett, S. A., and Luce, C. B. "Off-ramps and On-ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success." *Harvard Business Review*, 2005, 83(3), 43–54.
- Ibarra, H. "Homophily and Differential Returns: Sex Differences in Network Structure and Access in an Advertising Firm." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1992, 37(3), 422–447.
- Ibarra, H. "Personal Networks of Women and Minorities in Management: A Conceptual Framework." *Academy of Management*, 1993, 18(1), 56–87.
- Ibarra, H. "Race, Opportunity, and Diversity of Social Circles in Managerial Networks." *Academy of Management Journal*, 1995, 38, 673–703.
- Ibarra, H. "Paving an Alternative Route: Gender Differences in Managerial Networks." *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 1997, 60, 91–102.
- Kelly, M. J. "Management Mentoring in a Social Service Organization." *Administration in Social Work*, 2001, 25(1), 17–33.
- Kram, K. E. "Phases of the Mentor Relationship." *Academy of Management Journal*, 1983, 39(4), 40–43.
- Linehan, M., and Scullion, H. "The Development of Female Global Managers: The Role of Mentoring and Networking." *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2008, 83, 29–40.
- McGuire, G. M. "Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Networks: The Factors Affecting the Status of Employees' Network Members." *Work and Occupation*, 2000, 27, 501–523.
- Pillinger, J. "The Politics of Time: Can Work-Life Balance Really Work?" *Equal Opportunities Review*, 2002, 107, 18–21.
- Ragins, B. R. "Barriers to Mentoring: The Female Manager's Dilemma." *Human Relations*, 1989, 42(1), 50–56.
- Ragins, B. R., and Cotton, J. L. "Easier Said Than Done: Gender Differences in Perceived Barriers to Gaining a Mentor." *Academy of Management Journal*, 1991, 34, 939–951.
- Ragins, B. R., and Cotton, J. L. "Mentor Functions and Outcomes: A Comparison of Men and Women in Formal and Informal Mentoring Relationships." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1999, 84(4), 529–550.
- Schmuck, P. A. "Networking: a New World, a Different Game." *Educational Leadership*, 1986, 43(5), 60–61.
- Seibert, S. E., Kraimer, M. L., and Liden, R. C. "A Social Capital Theory of Career Success." *Academy of Management Journal*, 2001, 44, 219–237.
- Tharenou, P. "Does Mentor Support Increase Women's Career Advancement More Than Men's? The Differential Effects of Career and Psychosocial Support." *Australia Journal of Management*, 2005, 30(1), 77–109.
- Timberlake, S. "Social Capital and Gender in the Workplace." *Journal of Management Development*, 2005, 24(1), 34–44.
- Valerio, A. M. "An Action Plan for Developing Women Leaders." *In Focus/Diversity*, 2006, 26(5), 16–19.

JIA WANG is assistant professor of human resource development in the Department of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development at Texas A&M University

Copyright of *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education* is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. / Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.