

# People on projects

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## The Project Management Best Practices Report

### Product/Project Insights

## Building Career Relationships

### Networking as core competency

**by Dennis Smith** | A surprising number of people I know are pursuing skill certifications. What drives them? Are they trying to change careers? Are they trying to get a new or replacement job? Is their employer requiring it? There are some excellent reasons for going after additional certifications. Yet, from what I can tell, a strong résumé and a vibrant personal network are more important to your personal growth.

Training, education, and industry certifications are of great value, but their value declines rapidly, some say at over 20 percent per year. That would mean that at five years out of school, or five years after passing a certification test, unless refreshed, those credentials don't mean too much.

So what drives long term professional value? Two things: first, a string of successes and strong performances documented on a résumé—successes hopefully fostered by your investment in skill certificates. Secondly, it's who you know. As I watch Harvard and MIT alumni move through the Boston technology scene, it's the loyalty and exclusivity of their personal network that seems of highest value. Time and again I see the ability of top school graduates to get face time with their alumni peers.

That educational tie is a powerful asset.

#### Personal Networks

So the strongest thing you may get from the certification may be the additions to your network. The best long-term

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Social networking tools offer meaningful automation of your personal network, and can be applied in the project team context.

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value of your education may be the network you maintain. Your 1000 names in Outlook may be your biggest current asset.

Growing those connections is a challenge, as it takes time and perseverance. Yet I see few in the technical ranks paying attention to building value from those connections; the ones that I do see paying attention are the more successful ones.

Keeping the network current and the connections alive may be simpler than it seems. Jan Twombly of The Rhythm of Business ([www.rhythmofbusiness.com](http://www.rhythmofbusiness.com)) speaks of relationship capital. This may be financial, but is more often

keeping in touch with small “helps” to the other person. It could be sending them an interesting newspaper clipping, a link to an article, a note with an idea, or a business introduction. Do this often enough and with ideas useful to your contacts and they will remember you—and possibly return other currencies to you.

The new tools that help tie those names together are called social networking tools. What they deliver is meaningful automation of your personal network. There are many available; you'll find me, for example, on Spoke ([www.spoke.com](http://www.spoke.com)) and on LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)). Both have hundreds of thousands of members, and can help you leverage your network. I prefer LinkedIn as it focuses on stronger connections, although Spoke connects to a larger universe of people.

According to LinkedIn stats, I have access to 224,500 people including 146,600 deal makers. Practically speaking, the number of people I can access is not that big, however the 30 people that I connect to directly in LinkedIn are directly connected to a total of 904



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people. So with one degree of separation, with one mutual friend, I have pretty good quality access to 904 pre-screened people. Not a bad place to be. These tools are in early stages with the companies that provide them still developing ways to increase their effectiveness, but these tools show both good current value and incredible potential for the future.

### **Building Networks for Your Projects**

Now let's apply that technology to your project team. Not from the personal network vantage point, but with the idea in mind of building a network of internal and external technology and project resources, all linked up and searchable. I project that these resource networks will become common in larger companies and will be a cornerstone of the part-time and contract workforce. Many businesses tried this with custom software, but companies such as LinkedIn have built applications that meet the need.

First look at the possibilities for a network of contact or offshore development resources. Imagine having a network of resources that you could filter by specialty and then sort based how you are connected to them through other people in your network. To a first approximation, references and introductions are built into that network—which

means that you connect and are introduced to a potential contractor through people you know, sorted and organized for your convenience.

Next look at the project resources inside your company. I have found that the critical task in a big-company project is not so much developing the Gantt (although that is certainly a task not to be trivialized) but finding the right people for the work. You need to find the people who have the right skills and those who will work well together. Since the selection of people makes or breaks the best of plans, you need confirmation of their background from trusted sources before you recruit them for your project.

IBM has something similar to this that they call their "Blue Pages" application—their expertise locator. For little or no platform investment, you can use LinkedIn or Spoke to build a similar application for your project teams. With some forethought, you can even host it on LinkedIn or Spoke's free (for now) public servers with little compromise to the privacy of your contacts.

And lastly, as this is the decade of privacy, LinkedIn and others have worked hard to hide your contacts' information, so anyone wanting to reach one of your contacts has to go through you. You are the gatekeeper. While the systems preclude unapproved direct contact via their

system-stored information, your presence in the system does let people know you exist, and someone who wants to find you can probably Google you and turn up your contact information, so the privacy is not foolproof. But the Google approach turns their contact with you into a cold call, which is of much less use to them and far easier for you to screen.

TAKE A LOOK at social networking technology; with it you can build your project team and your career faster while connecting to a better selection of resources. Building and keeping your network vibrant through exchange of relationship currencies places you in the best position to leverage your network to grow your career and improve your project success. ■

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**Dennis Smith's** unique background includes 30 years of experience with software, electrical and mechanical engineering projects. As principal of CompanySmith, Inc., he enables businesses to shorten time-to-market, reduce costs and become product development leaders. He holds a B.S. in mechanical engineering from Purdue University and is a member of PDMA and PMI. Contact Dennis at [dms@companysmith.com](mailto:dms@companysmith.com) or visit his website at [www.companysmith.com](http://www.companysmith.com) to subscribe to his free newsletter.