



HOW DOES ONLINE LEARNING AFFECT YOUR BUSINESS NETWORKS?

By Sue-Ella Prodonovich

Last week I was lucky enough to learn from [Dr Nigel Spencer](#), about how to maximise the impact of learning and development (L&D)*. Dr Spencer is Professor of Education Innovation and Professional Practice at Queen Mary University of London.

It got me thinking. I'm often asked by firms to help train their early-career professionals on how to build their personal networks. Just as often I'm asked to teach them how to be better at developing new business.

After all, these are the people who are the future of the firm and they will soon be asked to step up and take the lead in contributing to its bottom line.

Very often those same firms will expect their staff to do a lot of their learning online - whether that's compulsory professional development or just general training.

I think they're missing a trick here. Because I think your training and learning should be one of the most important network building opportunities you have.

I also think getting good at new business development involves getting out from behind the desk and being part of the world, not staring at the screen. Here's why...

1. YOUR LARGEST SOURCE OF WORK WILL PROBABLY BE OTHER PROFESSIONALS

The truth is for most professionals, the best referrers are other professionals. For instance, if you're a lawyer working in mergers & acquisitions, the people who send work your way most often are likely to be corporate lawyers who work either client-side or within your own (or another) firm. If you're an accountant who specialises in complex SMSFs, chances are you'll receive referrals from general accountants. So how do you get to know the people who'll pass you that work?

Once upon a time, it was easy enough. There were few lawyers or accountants or other professionals and they all went to university together. You knew who was sound and who wasn't, who you were willing to pass trusted clients to and who you weren't. Now, that's not the case. There are just so many people, it's impossible to know everyone.

Attending face-to-face training is one of the few opportunities you'll have to mingle with your peers and get to forge a relationship with them. And it's in a much more authentic, less threatening environment than a forced networking event. (Not that you shouldn't be attending these too.)

But if you're doing all your learning online you're missing one of the easiest and most effective ways possible to build a network.

As I often say, if you haven't got time for BD, do CPD.

2. THE POWER OF FACE-TO-FACE

That's because, business is all about people - especially in professional services. This was really rammed home to me when I attended PwC's Employee Experience Conference. PwC's famous Chief Creative Officer [Russell Howcroft](#) (yep, the guy from Gruen) said he refused to do any e-learning whatsoever because he believed you learned nothing from it.

"Business is not faceless. Business is connections with people – that's how we learn," he said. He also said that he believed in meeting face-to-face to discuss most things because this is when curiosity, nuance and rigour take place.

In fact when it comes to building relationships I think one of the best things a young professional can do is to learn informally by shadowing their successful senior leaders and see how they do things. For anyone over 50, networks were necessarily built in person when knowledge was shared and bridges of trust were built.

Trust is the '[behavioural lubricant](#)', which creates networks and flexible thinking and reciprocity.

That's a harder to comprehend these days when we can just message each other and everyone's always available. But by getting out from behind the desk and watching the masters in action, it's likely to be reinforced in a way that's not possible in an online module, no matter how good it might be.

3. THE POWER OF INFORMALITY

What's also often lost today, is that a lot of learning doesn't happen formally. It happens in the informal discussions that spring up when you're discussing a topic. It happens in the interactions you have before or after class. It happens in things like study groups and joint projects.

If you want someone to get good at BD, you can't stick them in front of a screen and expect them to pick it up. They need those informal moments when the real learning occurs.

None of this has anything to do with online learning. Not that I'm saying online learning has no place at all. For routine and administrative learning, or as one component of an ongoing programme, or for a time-sensitive skills update, it's great. And it should be a part of what you do (albeit it a minor one).

But for powerful experiences where you can actually forge relationships and networks, explore ideas, satisfy your curiosity and build a business, nothing beats face to face.

WANT MORE?

If you'd like to know more about building an effective business development program in your firm [get in touch](#).

*With thanks to CLEAA [The Continuous Legal Education of Association of Australasia](#) for arranging Dr Spencer's session. Sue-Ella volunteers as a member of CLEAA's Executive.

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Sue-Ella is the Principal of [Prodonovich Advisory](#), a business dedicated to helping professional services practices sharpen their business development practices, attract and retain clients and become more profitable.

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