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ADAPT

# A Savvy Consultant Leverages a Personal Network for Successful Role Transition

## CASE CONTEXT

A rising star seeks new challenges and an expatriate post. She achieves her goal and transitions successfully as a result of the network and reputation she rapidly and systematically cultivated.



FEMALE

Level: FIRST-LEVEL  
LEADER

Industry: PROFESSIONAL  
SERVICES

## HIGH-PERFORMING LEADERS LEVERAGE NETWORKS TO DO 5 THINGS

Based on 20 years of research in more than 300 organizations, we know that the quality of your professional relationship play a significant role in your success. We have extended this research to describe the way high-performing leaders leverage their networks to: Innovate, Execute, Scale, Thrive and Adapt.



Kavita had a track record of growth and success in the IT/digital technology field, first as a software developer and

now as a consultant with a global firm. Based in India, she occasionally got involved in international projects, both as part of virtual teams and on-site with clients. The work with different cultures and contexts was rewarding, but she knew she wanted to be involved in more strategic projects and more complex challenges. “I was exposed to U.S. clients looking at digital technology as an enabler of transformation and growth ... I saw what was different, what was challenging and I really liked it.” She set her sights on a post in the U.S. working in mature markets and with large companies.

To achieve her goal, she built her network at every point. She used every project as a way to gain skill, understand the structure of the global business and cultivate trusted relationships. One project was pivotal: she played a technical role on a project that involved strategic work. “I got to know someone who does this work in three geographies and offered my support on future projects ... I began to work with him on business development proposals and expanded my contacts and connections that way.” Soon, she was pulled into those projects, including some in the U.S.

Kavita became known for quality work among project leads and senior managers, but also fostered a reputation as a connector of people and information. “I learned that if you do a good job they will come back to you, but likely just on the same topic. If you want to expand your horizons, you have to have conversations with the partners or project team, beyond what they are asking for: What else are you working on? Maybe I will have some detail that will help.” She looked for points of intersection and opportunities to be a connector. “One of my biggest value-adds is I know a lot of people in the digital transformation practice globally. If somebody says, *We are doing a proposal on this topic, have you done this before?* And, if I haven’t, I know somebody who has and I will connect them. Since I am the connection point I get pulled into the loop ... I became the focal point if global partners wanted to talk to somebody in India or Indian partners wanting to explore what is happening elsewhere.” By building these relationships, she paved the way for her transition into more demanding work.

Following a two-month project in Chicago, she felt prepared to pursue a position on the digital team in the U.S. “Every day on that project I was very challenged! It was exciting. My brain was working 110 percent ... I was ready to explore opportunities to move here.” She went to her mentor for an exploratory conversation about making a change and possible opportunities.

*“I said, I want to play out the thought with you.*

We had a long discussion of the pros and cons and agreed it made sense.” The mentor was ready to send an email and make some calls to get the process started, but Kavita chose to introduce the idea directly. *“I said, No, don’t talk to them. I know the partners in the U.S., the head of the global practice and the talent head for the sector. Let me talk to them myself.”* Because of the network she had already established, Kavita bypassed the formal referral structure and was soon planning her move.

Facing major professional and personal changes, Kavita wisely avoid becoming a “biased learner”—a common trap people fall into when transitioning into new roles. Research shows that often people over-value their own expertise and existing network. They over-rely on trusted ties and people whose expertise was valuable in the prior role—holding on to 70-80 percent of ties from before rather than seeking out new experts, advisors and allies. This behavior creates unintentional bias about what they see as important in the new role and prevents people from building the skills or doing the work that matters.

Kavita had strong ties within the practice and built on those to meet her peers working on other teams to gain insight into the demands of the role. She did not have a network outside her specialty—so she sought out opportunities to meet people who would help her gain a broad perspective. She attended company social events every Friday to meet peers and partners from other practices—and learn more about activities and life in her new city. One of these connections opened the door to working on a local project that involved a multi-disciplinary team, giving her another perspective on the company and client work. She still valued her connector role in India, but shifted it by offering to help the head of talent recruit people across practices for APAC offices and projects—which led to her volunteering to be part of the training for new consultants as well.

Kavita has been in her new role for nearly a year and has been thriving. She now manages a team within a larger project, and she also plays small roles on other projects. *“I am learning broadly. It has been a way to help me get engaged and to meet more people, expand my thinking and prepare for better roles in the future.”*

## Network Insights

- **Use work to build your network.** Build connections based on collaborating—even if it is a small project. “Every opportunity to work, I use as a chance to get to know that person better and to help them know me better ... You don’t have to wait for a big engagement to come your way.”
- **Ask questions outside of project scope.** This helps you know how to think of each other for future needs and allows you to apply your interest and expertise to theirs. “I question people a lot and am proactive at sharing my perspective ... I try to find those points in a conversation beyond the specific project. It gives you some cues of how you can be an aid to them later.”
- **Stay connected with people on topics they care about.** Send relevant articles, links or ideas to keep the conversation going. Introduce people who may have shared interest or could benefit from each other’s expertise.
- **Use your existing network for feedback and referrals.** Ask others to fill in gaps: “Who else do I need to know? Will you introduce me? What else do I need to know? How can I learn?”

## Build a Diversified Network for Success

Networks of high performers are diversified across expertise domains, functions and levels. Such networks create the path to future opportunities and allow for effective transitions to new roles. To build a diversified network, take these steps:

1. *Build a successful professional relationship with your manager.* Be good at the work *and* connect off task (for example, talking about interests, ambitions or family) to establish and strengthen trust.
2. *Cultivate connections with people who are up and lateral in the organization.* Aim to make this group roughly 5% to 10% of your network. Find projects or activities to work on with these people to help them see how your expertise can be deployed in other efforts.
3. *Build a vibrant peer network.* Often overlooked, these are the people to tap into for help and questions about similar kinds of problems (e.g., team issues, revenue pressures, project scope, etc.).
4. *Cultivate outside connections.* These are relationships outside your function, specialty or region—but also with clients or outside experts. They provide expertise and context, give referrals and create pull into opportunities.
5. *Establish energized connections with junior colleagues.* They will bring greater purpose to your efforts and often yield surprising opportunities when they trust you.

### ABOUT THE RESEARCH & ROB CROSS

Building on 20 years of research with more than 300 organizations, the Network Leader Research Project seeks to understand the approach and strategies that enable certain leaders to consistently achieve peak performance. The research includes 160 in-depth interviews conducted by Rob Cross, a Professor of Management at University of Virginia’s McIntire School of Commerce. The Connected Commons is currently focusing its research on leadership effectiveness, talent optimization and organizational alignment and change—three areas where network insights can clearly drive performance. For more information visit [www.connectedcommons.com](http://www.connectedcommons.com) or email Rob at [rlcrossjr@gmail.com](mailto:rlcrossjr@gmail.com).