



LEARN &
ADAPT

A Personal Passion & Instinct to Connect People Build an Engineer's Reputation & Network, Leading to Dream Job

CASE CONTEXT

A technical professional learns to connect diverse groups and interests, gaining valuable leadership experience. She also leverages her collaborative skills to create a professional group within her firm. These efforts build her reputation in the network, leading to a new job that builds on her skills.



FEMALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR

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.



Alma is an engineer with a background working in government, the private sector and consulting firms.

Her specialty and passion for what she does has opened the door to many opportunities. Most recently, she landed an ideal post as a project manager in a different division of her current firm. "I'm always looking to grow, share ideas and apply what I know in new ways."

Her prior position, which she held for nearly two years, gave Alma a chance to extend beyond her individual contributor role and serve as an unofficial project manager. The work was a cross-organizational project, involving various public- and private-sector partners in a long-term, collaborative effort. "I found that the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing. I have decent people skills, so was able to connect different people, make them talk to each other and start to work together. I stepped in to set up the right meetings, run the meetings and make sure people do their action items." She learned a lot about herself. She always saw herself as a technical expert, but in doing this work, she began to develop leadership and collaborative interests and skills. She found she had the ability to bridge different groups and priorities.

"I learned that project management was something I enjoy. I like people, I care about people, I want to make a difference ... And, I found I can connect the dots, get people together and deliver a project. I know who people are, who can get us more information or more detail, who has to be pulled in ... Even when it is tense, or people were frustrated, I could still talk with them. I could be lighthearted, have a little humor and still be firm and productive ... It was all about forming those relationships."

Even as she was learning and enjoying the work, the job had a major downside: a 90-minute commute each way. When she was introduced to a senior leader at a company social event, she quickly found herself applying for a role working for him. The job lead came about naturally, as a result of Alma's broad network and reputation. As a sideline to her client work, she had formed a technical community that brought together the experts in her specialty who worked in various divisions and for a diverse range of clients. One of the members made the introduction to the senior leader by touting the group that Alma had created.

"We have a lot of talent but we work on separate projects. I knew there had to be best practices and ideas that don't get shared. My goal when I started the group was to create that sharing culture and give people a chance to mingle and collaborate."



She grew the community by reaching out just by email, first to the experts she knew, and then asking them to spread the word to others. She attended internal events and readily talked about the group, finding people who had other contacts or ideas for how to get more people involved. She searched company databases for people with related expertise or doing similar work and sent out hundreds of emails inviting people to join. “It skyrocketed. I was nominated for an innovation award in the company ... I had the reputation and was becoming known as a subject matter expert, and the result has been fantastic. I didn’t intend it, but this work got me my new job.”

Looking back, Alma also sees how having a project that she was trying to grow gave her a means to engage others at networking events or when she was asked, *What do you do?* by others in the firm. At first she was hesitant to attend company events as a new, junior employee, but her manager required participation in a monthly business development breakfast. Once she started the technical community and was looking to grow the group, she was able to talk to others and introduce herself in a meaningful way. Having a prototype or project to relate to other people’s work and interests is more powerful (and usually easier) than talking generally about skills or experience. “Having a passion for something you are doing and having something to share with others gets people engaged. Just saying, *Hi, this is who I am* doesn’t work as well as having this site to talk about. Before, it was just, *Hi, I’m talking to you because I’m supposed to.*”

Alma plans to build on lessons learned from her past job to excel in her new role. She will continue to grow and strengthen the technical group, creating a resource and reputation for the work of her colleagues. She is focused on getting acclimated to the new work, reaching out to learn from people in similar roles and within her team. She sees her natural tendency to be a connector as a skill she wants to develop and use more intentionally.

For Alma, the new job is an opportunity to leverage skills and pursue work she is interested in—with the great benefit of shaving more than an hour off of her commute each day! What may seem like a chance connection leading to a dream job was really the result of building a non-insular, boundary spanning network.

Network Insights

- **Value is created in projects and on teams by people who are brokers in the network.** Alma found that when you connect people and cross boundaries, information and ideas spread, concerns are aired and solutions can be found.
- **Most jobs come through bridging ties or weak links—not close, day-to-day relationships.** The key is trust. Alma benefitted from her reputation in the network and a tangible, relevant project. What could have been a chance and fleeting encounter became a conversation that improved her life—but it was predicated on investments she had made in the network over time.
- **Investing time in something you are passionate about—technical subject, type of work, company activities—creates energy and pull to more of the work you like to do.** You’ll build skills, make connections and give others a reason to trust in your capability.
- **Having something to show and engage others with is invaluable.** When Alma had the group site to talk about (and not just herself), she was able to connect with others and build her network. When you have a prototype, tool or project to show and talk about, your discussion focuses on helping people imagine how it can be used or adapted in their world. And, again, it builds trust in your capability.

Non-insular Network Fuels Career Mobility

People with non-insular, boundary spanning networks—with ties and connections across silos or expertise and outside their organization—tend to enjoy better pay and performance evaluations, rapid promotion and job mobility.

The network does not need to be big and the relationships do not have to be close. Bridging ties enable you to more effectively understand and solve a problem or move an idea through a network. This builds your reputation and pulls you into new spaces and opportunities.

1. Seek out experts and people who have done the same for similar work but in different contexts or pockets.
2. Have a specific tool or project to share and talk about. A website or prototype is a tangible way to introduce your expertise and build reputation across weak, but valued, connections.
3. Don’t be shy about asking, “Who else?” With each contact, always ask for a referral to others who might be interested in the work you’re doing.

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 or email Rob at rlcrossjr@gmail.com.