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Berkeley Undergraduate Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9sz8c1p0>

Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 26(3)

Author

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Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/B3263024761

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MEDIA PROTESTING,
POLITICAL NETWORKING,
THE CROSS, AND THE
POTOMAC

AN EXPLORATION OF PERCEPTIONS AND UTILIZATIONS OF NETWORKING SYSTEMS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

SURF Conference Panel Session 2A

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Mentor: Professor Eric Schickler, Political Science

Since the Great Recession in 2007, the unemployment rate for young college graduates has not pulled through the slump. In 2013, according to a report by the Economic Policy Institute, the unemployment rate for people under the age of 25 was 16.3 percent, which is noticeably higher compared to the overall unemployment rate at 7.7 percent.¹ At a time when statistics show outlooks are dim for college graduates, I believe having a professional network is even more imperative to get a job after graduation.

I. Methodology

My research asks how college-affiliated adults living and working in Washington, D.C. perceive networking relationships, how they develop and maintain networking ties, and how effective those networks truly are in their career trajectory. I approached my research questions in three ways. First, I conducted a survey to investigate how current business professionals and college students interning in the capital view and participate in social and/or digital networking. Second, I interviewed current successful business professionals in D.C. and identified how they advanced in their career.² Last, I studied networking events to see how the in-person networking venue affected those participants. Through all these methods, I gleaned information on how the utilization and strategies differed between the two groups. For the purpose of this paper, I will argue that the differences of network utilization and strategy between interns and current business professionals show that networking is a strategic game that involves merit and quality connections.

¹ Economic Policy Institute: Research and Ideas for Shared Prosperity. "The Class of 2013, Young Graduates Still Face Dim Job Prospects." Accessed August 21, 2013. <http://www.epi.org/publication/class-of-2013-graduates-job-prospects/>

² All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. Names have been replaced with interview identification numbers.

II. Conceptual Framework

French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu defined the social capital theory as “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.”³ Furthermore, he explained that “capital presents itself under three fundamental species (each with its own subtypes), namely, economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital.”⁴ Put differently, gaining resources advances one’s status, and with higher status one gets more capital to exchange. When one achieves a higher status, one gains a sort of power. In the networking world, having social capital is very valuable; it can get someone an interview and even a job. However, it is important to use the capital in a strategic way.

The next framework also comes from Bourdieu. In “Habitus and Communication Theory,” St. Clair, Rodriguez, and Nelson analyzed Bourdieu when talking about social life. They said life is “like a game, but the stakes are higher. It requires constant improvising. No game is understood by simply grasping the rules that define it. It involves having ‘a sense of the game’...Games are strategic.”⁵ As a result, one can think of playing life as a game in which the field of power relations is “the network of objective relations between positions subtends and orients the strategies which the occupants of the different positions implement in their struggles to defend or improve their positions...strategies which depend for their force and from on the position each agent occupies in the power relations.”⁶ To put it simply, when playing life as a game, one uses strategies to move around the field and based on one’s skill one can improve one’s position. In this paper, I will use the social capital theory and the metaphor of playing life as a game to analyze networking in the nation’s capital.

For the purpose of my research, I defined network in my own words with a three-prong approach. To network is to intentionally reach out, make relationships, and use those connections to further a professional trajectory. There are many ways to network: online (LinkedIn, Facebook, email, or Twitter), in person, at events, at work, or even through random encounters while hiking in Yosemite (in fact, one of the interviewees gave out business cards while hiking the Half Dome).⁷ Networking strategies includes the actions listed previously but also includes developing a mentorship, giving out business cards, and conducting informational interviews.

III. Findings

The first point is about utilization differences between the interns and current business professionals. I found that current interns in D.C. seem to be programmed to believe that quantity is better than quality when it comes to professional connections. This is contrary to the idea held by the current business professionals, who believe in a more laid back approach to networking. To be sure, my survey results suggested a different conclusion as indicated by Table 1.

3 Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1992), 118–119.

4 Ibid.

5 Robert N. St. Clair, Walter E. Rodriguez and Carma Nelson. “Habitus and Communication Theory.” University of Louisville. <http://www.structural-communication.com/Articles/habitus-communication-theory-stclair.html>

6 Pierre Bourdieu. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Edited by Randal Johnson. (United Kingdom: Polity Press, 1993), 30.

7 20130725S01. Interview with author. Personal Interview. Washington, D.C., July 25, 2013.

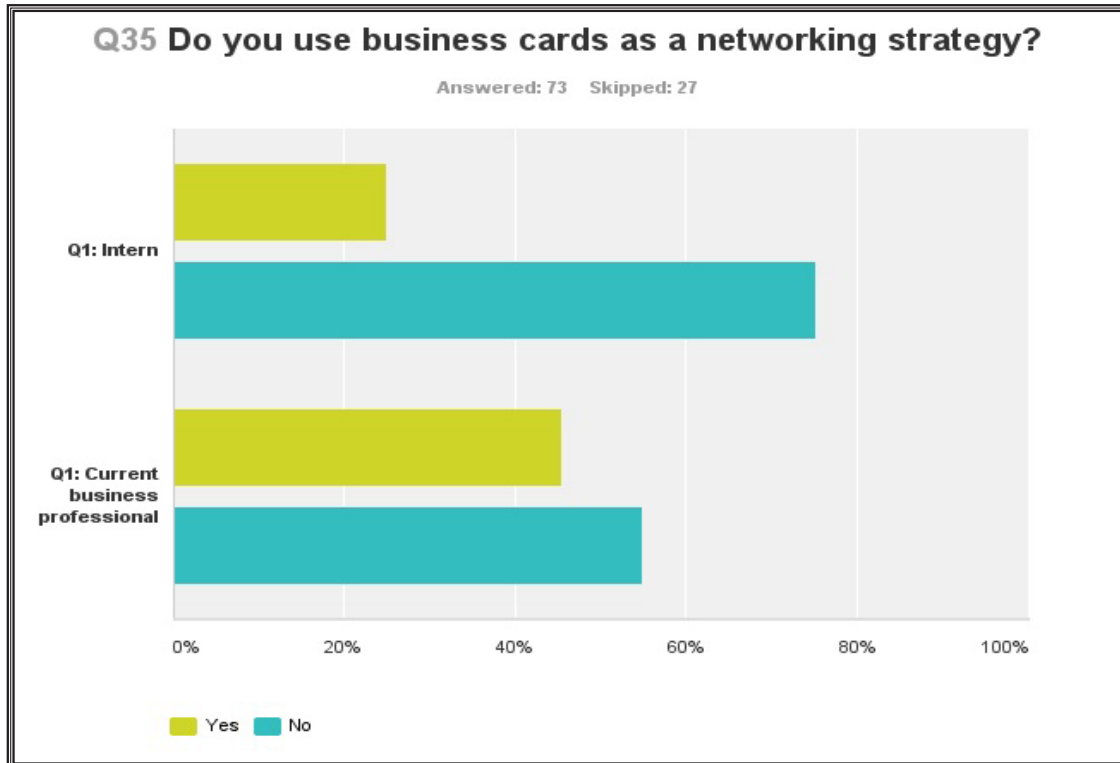


Table 1.

The chart depicts findings from the survey I conducted. When respondents were asked if they use business cards as a networking strategy, 25 percent of the interns said “yes” while 45 percent of current business professionals said “yes.” However, in interviews and observational study, I found different outcomes.

To explain how intense interns were at pursuing networks in the Capital, take this case as an example. As a participating attendee, I observed networking at its peak at the Madhatters Campus Progress Intern Networking Night. Madhatters, a bar in Dupont Circle, was close to capacity with interns from all over the district. This event’s goal was to help interns network with each other. During the event, I witnessed more business cards given out than any other time during my time of research. One individual gave a business card to all five people in my group even though none of us knew what his job was, and we had no connection to it. Even though my main objective that night was to observe, I too received business cards from many different representatives, including one young man who introduced himself as a future senator. It can be inferred from that event that the more connections, the better. In other words, it is quantity that matters, not quality. The networking night exemplified how interns pushed business cards to every breathing candidate hoping for a job years in the future. Randomly giving out paper cards with various contact information printed on it will not produce a meaningful connection.

On the contrary, in an interview with an ex-governmental employee, he asked me “What happened to the actual jobs during the summer?”⁸ His point was to show that when he went into the professional world, it was based off merit, not who you knew or what internships filled your resume. He explained to me that to get his first job, he applied, took a test, interviewed, and hoped that he qualified for the position.⁹ Times have obviously changed; now knowing people on

⁸ 20130812S01. Interview with author. Personal Interview. Washington, D.C., August 12, 2013.

⁹ Ibid.

the inside truly does get your foot in the door. Granted, as one interviewee told me, networking can get your foot in the door, but it will take “you” to get your whole body in.¹⁰

Keep in mind the two opposing views presented previously: one view held by the ex-governmental employee who believed in merit and the other view seen at the networking night as quantity over quality. As one interviewee claimed, as a current business professional, she would rather spend time fostering relationships rather than make new network connections.¹¹ In these examples, business cards act as actual resources in the material sense. However, the way they are used, to get your foot in the door or to introduce yourself as a future senator, is virtual in the symbolic sense. The sum of these resources, the business card plus the utilization of the interaction, creates social capital. As stated previously, the more capital, the higher the status.

The second point is about networking strategies. Many people have a love-hate relationship with networking. Some people testified that they received their job positions only by networking while others detest the practice altogether.¹² I found that in both populations of my study, whether one loves or hates networking depends largely on strategy and thus relates to Bourdieu’s notion of playing life as a game.

In terms of the first testimony of loving networking, a business professional described how he landed his current job in an interview with me.¹³ Through a series of random connections, by the time he went into his final interview, he already had emailed and spoken to almost every person in his specific office division. He emailed the division head right after he applied cold for the position but then used his network to “attack” the office from all angles. He used his Cal alumni network, LinkedIn, and raw research to work his way into the company. Yet another interviewee told me that she does not network. She exclaimed, “No, I don’t go to networking functions, I really don’t. Instead what I do is I go to functions that I have a vested interest in and then from there, I don’t know if it is because I am a six footer but people gravitate towards me.”¹⁴ In addition, when the respondents were asked about what they expected to get out of their current jobs, only two out of twenty-nine interns responded by saying that they expected nothing from their current jobs. The most frequent answer was resume building and networking ties. Table 2 shows that the expectations of interns are clearly for networking reasons.

Similarly, current business professionals are using their current positions as a stepping-stone, meaning they are playing the field to improve their positions. Table 3 shows that only three out of fifty-nine business professionals said they expected their jobs to be permanent positions. In other words, the vast majority of people are networking and creating those stable connections that produce social capital.

The similarity between the people who hold the two opposing beliefs—hating versus loving networking—is that both groups practice networking. Moreover, as I found out in the interviews, they both claim that their personalities helped them tremendously. The first interviewee who attacked his company from all sides attributed his “adult personality” to the military.¹⁵ In the military, he was able to learn from people who were “comfortable in their own skin.” His military

10 Ibid.

11 20130717S01. Interview with author. Personal Interview. Washington, D.C., July 17, 2013.

12 20130716S01. Interview with author. Personal Interview. Washington, D.C., July 16, 2013. and 20130717S01. Interview with author. Personal Interview. Washington, D.C., July 17, 2013.

13 20130716S01. Interview with author. Personal Interview. Washington, D.C., July 16, 2013.

14 20130717S01. Interview with author. Personal Interview. Washington, D.C., July 17, 2013.

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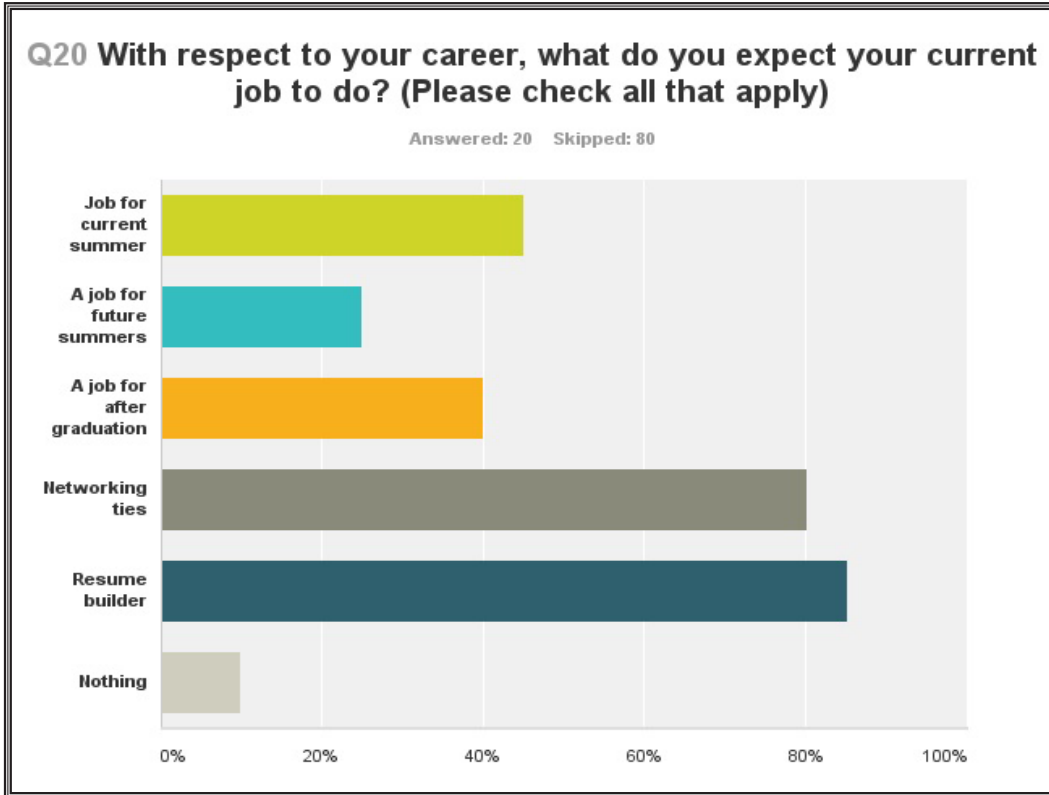


Table 2.

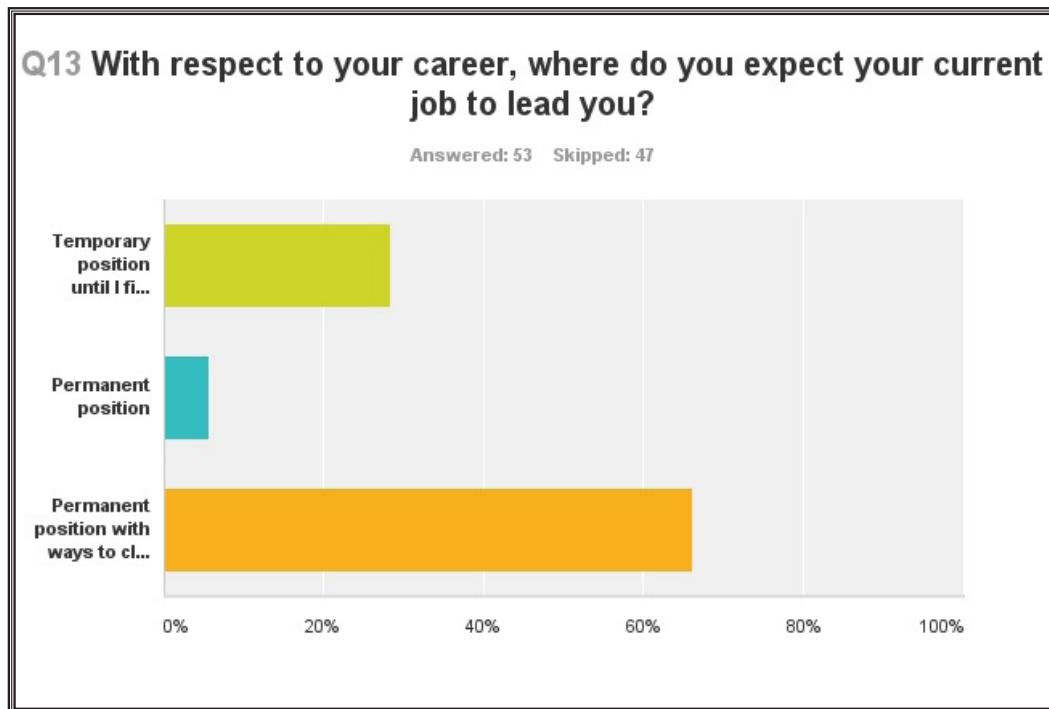


Table 3.

experience gave him access to powerful role models to look up to while growing as an individual. In order to network in person, it takes someone who is willing to take on the first prong of my definition for networking: reach out. The two previous individuals disagreed on the desire to network, but they both used their personalities to do so. Personality here is the strategy used to play the game.

Overall, I would like to demonstrate that whether one loves or hates networking, it is still a strategic game. If one has the personality to play the game, then one will start to be able to exchange social capital. Furthermore, when the respondents were asked which characteristics they liked most about their mentors, the survey revealed “caring” and “patient” as the two most popular answers. Other less common responses included “experience” and “intelligence.” It can be inferred from this data that people value personality. Also, responses such as “experience” and “intelligence” suggest that the mentors have been playing the game for a long time.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, networking is the oil that allows Washington, D.C. to run smoothly, but young interns should take a lesson from the current business professionals who know the tricks of the trade. First, quality is better than quantity. Invest time into connections that will produce more than just a job opportunity and will make for a better relationship. Second, think of networking as a game; it is not a “be-all end-all” venue to get jobs. Instead, it takes merit and hard work to get to the ultimate position one wants. If people play the game right with the right personality, they will at least get their foot in the door. If one correctly positions him or herself on the field, then he or she will be able to create social capital, which is wildly important in getting a job in the current hiring environment.

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