Navigating and Networking at the Conference

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Abstract. The increasing complex fragmented business process, demand for speed, and pressures for cost control forced on us by the changing world situation reinforce the importance of better relationships throughout supply management processes. Similarly, rapid economic development, demand for increases in quality and performance, changing political attitudes, significantly improved communication systems, better transportation systems, trends toward economic integration and increasingly intense competition are tremendous social forces driving change in our supply management processes. These social economic changes will become even more important as we move on into the 21st century. This paper defines the process of networking and is my personal advice on how you can use networking during ISM’s 90th International Supply Management Conference as a great career building opportunity for you.

Definition. Networking means intentionally getting and giving information. It is not about a big fat Rolodex or long e-mail address lists. Rather networks are always mutually beneficial arrangements to exchange information between some set of two or more people who hope to learn from each other. Networking means lots of things to lots of people, but as I use the concept here, I mean a process of intentionally building personal and business relationships (networks) with the right people globally to enhance your supply management process and its managerial system. This power cannot be wielded just from your office; rather it is shared mutually by all elements of the network. Networking involves Cyberspace and the web, but they are only tools for the process. Networking is strategic managerial behavior that takes place over the long-term, across organizational boundaries and perhaps globally. As limited resources preclude networking with everybody in the market, we must limit the network to a special set of strategic supplier partners, intermediaries and others that we have carefully selected to support our supply management process. Even so, we do not want to be myopic. We must be proactive and alert to opportunities to expand our global network by introducing new members to our network.

Much has been written about partnerships, strategic alliances, and better supplier relations. These are all special forms of networking. We have known for a long time that networking is key to success in many ways. Fred Luthans writing in *The Academy of Management EXECUTIVE (1988) II* showed that networking was the key characteristic of successful managers. When Luthans and his team of researchers statistically evaluated the differences between successful managers (those who were promoted faster than others) and effective managers (those recognized for doing a good job), they found that networking was the only statistically significant factor that delineated between the two sets of managers. The successful managers communicated more and better. Similarly, a CAPS study of world-class skills for supply management in 2000 showed that interpersonal communication is the number one skill required for success. The 2004 CAPS study showed that teambuilding is still the number one skill. The top skills included strategic planning, effective communication and relationship building. Most authorities agree that good
Networking practices improve general business communication and performance. In my mind, all forms of networking are important tools for improving supply management.

This figure shows potential sources for network partners and how the network might look. The lines show potential sources of information that could be included in a typical network. Networks are always dynamic and changing. Your networks will most likely take many forms and be quite flexible. Even so, you will probably have your favorite sources and depend heavily on that network.

**Opportunity.** You came to the 90th Annual International Supply Management Conference to glean new ideas, build your knowledge, and to make personal contacts that will add value to your career in supply management and make your professional work better and personally more satisfying. Coming here was a wise decision, and you can earn the most bang for your conference buck by building better networks. You can use the 90th International Supply Management Conference to add value to your career in 2005 and beyond. Here is that personal advice that I promised you.

**Personal Advice.** First let me assure you that networking opportunities are everywhere. We cannot avoid them. Second, I want to assure you that we network all the time in our jobs, our profession and our social lives. We need to bring those skills to the conference. Networking at this conference is a “win-win” process. It is good for you and everyone else. Networks are very dynamic. When we talk about networks everyone agrees, 1) that networks can really help us solve problems, 2) we must be proactive in the communication process and 3) getting the process started is up to us.
As you “navigate” the 90th International Supply Management Conference program, here are five steps to deliberately build your networks.

1. **Identify the problems that you seek help to solve.** Before leaving home, identify the problems that you want to seek help to solve.

   a) Put your problems into categories, e.g., new technology, supplier development, cost management, supplier relations, sources of supply, etc. Define the problems so that you can discuss them with others at the conference. Have you attempted solutions? What happened? Be prepared to discuss these issues in detail.

   b) Prioritize the list so that you build networks aimed at your most important situation.

2. **Carefully study the conference program and rosters** to identify who might have the information that you need and decide how you can contact that person.

   a) Look for people from your industry and from businesses like yours. Study the list of speakers and exhibitors for possible contacts.

   b) At the same time, look for people from different industries and firms quite different from yours that are likely to have the same problem.

   c) Make it a point to meet people from supplier organizations in the exhibits.

   d) Visit with the ISM staff at ISM exhibits.

   e) Keep calling card records of casual contacts during the programs.

3. **Make arrangements to meet the people** that you have determined are potential additions to your network. Make contact with them here or after the conference.

4. **Meet and establish the mutual relationship required to network**--be ready to exchange cards and to buy the coffee. In these new contacts, you must establish yourself with that new person. Who you are and what you do determines the basis for future communication. The key to success is to be up front, honest, and ask for help in a non-threatening way. Most people enjoy meeting new people. Everybody loves to be asked for help. It makes us feel important.

5. **Be prepared to meet other people** who are also looking for new contacts for their networks. Make time available so that people can seek you out.

Remember that all networks are people. Other people will be there with problems like yours, and they are also seeking networks. You must seek out people, introduce yourself and be quick to start the conversation. People want to know who people are before we do business or share much information. How tough it is to meet people depends on culture and industry, but a universal truth is that we all want to know who is involved in our
business. Here are four questions to ask that will encourage extemporaneous conversations and lead to new opportunities to build your network as you “navigate” the 90th ISM conference.

1. **What do you do as a supply manager, domestically and globally?** We want to find out quickly if we are likely to learn anything here and if so what.

2. **Have you experienced this problem (use your favorite problem) recently?** We need to determine quickly if our new acquaintance has the experience to help us learn.

3. **What have you tried that worked or did not work?** We want to see quickly what alternative solutions they have used and if the solutions worked.

4. **Do you have a network that has helped you address the problem?** Does this person have a network that will participate with us in solving our problems? Will he or she invite us to use the net? Good referrals can be very important.

Your network may be a very complicated organization with many participants. Even so, the network will always consist of two sets of people—those you know and those you are about to meet. Both groups are vitally important, and you should not hesitate for even a moment to add new sources to your network. Everyone that I have ever talked to about networks has been adamant on this point. When you have a new problem, start using the network and do not be afraid to seek out new sources. You must remember to seek sources both internally and externally to your firm. My work shows that the network is most effective when it is working both internally and externally. Indeed, this is one of the profound benefits of your network system. It can always yield new and beneficial sources.

Navigating the 90th ISM Conference to build your network is an intense opportunity. You have less than two and one-half days to make the contacts and evaluate people as sources. You must come to San Antonio ready to network. You must be proactive and alert to opportunities to expand your network by introducing new members to your network. To make conference networking a meaningful tool, you must be prepared to simultaneously do five things:

1. **Diligently identify and select the people** who will be your information sources.

2. **Meet the people**—make every meal, every break, every session, and every hour an opportunity by talking to someone. It is acceptable to meet and greet old friends, but remember those that know what you need are already in your network. To maximize the benefits of the unique opportunities of the 90th International Supply Management Conference, you must meet and interact with new people. Never offend old friends, but work diligently to meet new people!

3. **Have a system to track these new sources** by name, address, telephone, fax, and e-mail, and each day during the conference take time to keep your system up to date.
4. **Build the feedback system** that will get the information or knowledge that you need.

5. **Be prepared to reward the new members of your network.** To me, this means follow up after the conference. If it was a meaningful contact you must build a communication base and begin a meaningful exchange of information. You may even want to visit this person and their operations. We call this “benchmarking.” It applies here!

As you “navigate” the 90th International Supply Management Conference your network will be a simple and growing organization. You will want and need a smaller network. You will want to arrive in San Antonio with a problem or a short list of problems along with some thoughts about who might be able to help and how to meet them. This figure shows how your network model for the conference could look. It is a truncated version of the model shown earlier.

![Network Model Diagram](image_url)

My last piece of advice is long term. You will not meet everyone that you have identified at the conference. It is nearly impossible, but that is all right. You will have a list of registered conference participants and can contact them after the conference. Networking is a powerful managerial tool we can learn to use as individuals in our day-to-day purchasing operations. Equally important, the processes of the supply management process must include the concept of networking to enhance motivation and support better communication. So the skills you practice and hone during the conference will be invaluable as you go about your career every day.

**Summary.** The 90th International Supply Management Conference, like life, is about networking, but it is up to you! At every meeting, every meal, every general session put on a smile, introduce yourself, shake hands, and give away lots of business cards. Determine quickly what this person does and what her/his potential is to help make your life better? Can you help them? If the answers to these questions seem favorable, quickly make this person a friend and build your network! Remember these five points:

1. Better managerial networks make better managers.
2. The information needed to solve most supply management problems is readily available.

3. Your networks can help you identify and solve your problems. Networking will contribute to the success of your supply management process, your firm and in the end your personal success.

4. We must build feedback systems that will maintain and reward our networks.

5. As a supply manager, you are a key strategic element in your organization!

Successfully “navigating” the 90th International Supply Management Conference will add value to your career and build your business! I challenge you to make the most of this conference provided by ISM. You came to this International Conference for professional development and knowledge. To be sure that you do that, come to this exciting session on Sunday morning to hone the skills and gain the knowledge needed to maximize the value from your trip to San Antonio and the ISM conference. Finally remember this profound set of wisdom.

*There is a better way. Find it!*

Thomas Edison

REFERENCES

**Book references:**