

A short guide to network development

By David Wilcox

This draft guide is available at <http://www.makingthenetwork.org/nets/> together with a workshop game from http://partnerships.typepad.com/usefulgames/2004/04/planning_a_netw.html

This draft includes:

- A short guide
- A checklist to help you think through network development
- Instructions for playing the networking game. Cards for the game can be downloaded from http://partnerships.typepad.com/usefulgames/2004/04/planning_a_netw.html

I would be interested to hear from anywhere who would like to share ideas on networking and network development, and from groups or organisations interested in training events using these materials.

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A short guide to network development by David Wilcox

The aim of this short guide is to help you define or review the purpose and activities of your network, decide what will be needed to make it work, and spot where tensions may arise. It is constructed on the basis that you should:

- Decide what you do in the light of the purpose of the network.
- Be clear on who benefits and in what way – for example, just members or others.
- Design the style and structure of the network to suit its purpose and activities.
- Recognise that people communicate and learn in different ways.

The term network is used loosely here, covering everything from informal, periodic gatherings of people who may also exchange email and phone calls, to collaborations that may be better seen as more formal associations or consortia.

For the purpose of this guide, the main characteristics of networks are that they are non-hierarchical with many links between members; their activities focus on information and communication; and their structures are relatively 'light' with a small core. The main beneficiaries are likely to be the members.

There's some deliberate repetition in the guide as I have approach core issues from different angles including activities, structure, communication. It is a first draft for discussion.

What is the network for?

- Information: keep members in touch with current developments in their field.
- Making contacts: members can meet others for business or social benefit
- Promotion: raising awareness publicly of member activities, and their importance.
- Advocacy: promoting a particular approach to work in your field – a set of values.
- Action: creating opportunities for members to do things together.
- Mutual support: keeping up confidence and enthusiasm.
- Learning: formally or informally

The network may be aiming to cover some or all of these – but there can be tensions, particularly if members have differing views on the main purpose. One way to check this is to ask:

- What would the network count as successes in its operation?
- Who should benefit most from activities? Only network members, or others too?
- Are the benefits promoted mainly collective (We will achieve...) or individual (This will be useful to you). Do most members see this the same way?

Scope and membership of the network

How many members are there – or could there be?

What are the qualifications, restrictions on joining? Are these explicit?

If membership is restricted, who makes decisions on applications, and how?

Is the network connected to any other body? If so, what is the relationship?

Membership criteria should be coherent with the purpose of the network. For example:

- Information-sharing networks can be open, unless the aim is to particularly privilege certain types of member.
- Advocacy networks will seek to attract those with a shared set of values.
- Members of action-oriented networks will need to develop higher levels of trust between members who do things together.
- Learning networks need a clearly shared area of interest, practice and passion.

What will the network do?

The activities of the network should – fairly obviously - be tailored to its purpose and the needs of its members. Unfortunately this isn't always the case in practice. People can dive in and set up meetings, communication systems or projects that are inappropriate. Reflecting on why things aren't working can help redefine the purpose and/or clarify whether everyone has a similar view. Network activities might include:

Information and communication activities

- Newsletters and magazines – print or online
- Telephone conferences
- Surveys
- Online discussion forums
- Library and information service – physical or online

The nature of these activities will depend on the purpose of the network, how far it is inward or outward facing, and what resources it has. Members volunteering to run services can only do so much after initial enthusiasm – so the network should be realistic in its expectations.

Various types of meetings.

- Formal committees
- Creative workshops
- Lectures
- Social events
- Visits
- Seminars and conferences
- Task-related groups

Some can be combined – a reception with a lecture, a workshop with some formal decision-making afterwards.

Projects

- Courses – print, face to face, or online
- Other formal or informal learning opportunities.
- Campaigns
- Other activities related to member interests that may be developed centrally or among groups of members.

Projects may be the field in which different views of the purpose of the network surface, and tensions may arise. For example, some members may try to use the name of the network to help them develop projects, get funding, look for business opportunities – when others see the network

as something for learning, mutual support and information learning. On the other hand, a learning network will lose momentum if the focus is on central information giving and a few social events. In order to learn people need to engage, review the experience, reflect and plan what next.

Style and structure

The style of operation of the network, and its structure, should reflect its purpose and activities. For example:

- Networks that are mainly for information-sharing and mutual support can have a relatively light structure and informal style. Different people can take responsibility for activities.
- Promotion and advocacy networks will need some way of ensuring that the messages from the network reflect broadly the views of its members. This may be through elections and representation of members, or through workshops, discussions, polls or other ways of gathering opinions. It may be that 'network' is not an appropriate structure, and a more formal association will be appropriate.
- Tensions can arise in action-oriented networks if members feel that the centre – a committee, set of founding members, staff – are using the network to further their own interests without ensuring that members needs are met.

The network tools for style and structure include:

- Material explaining what the network is for, what it does, and how they join.
- Membership criteria and directory or set of profiles
- A constitution – if issues of power, control, decision-making are likely to be important.

As indicated elsewhere, 'network' is a fuzzy concept which is not a tightly-defined structure like a company. Networks may have different legal formats, and campaigns, companies, associations may be more or less 'networky' in their operations.

In practice the style of the network is likely to be influenced strongly by the person or people setting it up. However, for the network to be robust it will be important for the founders to gain commitment from others, and take account of others, bearing in mind:

- Different people communicate and learn in different ways: some are visual, some auditory, some 'feel' more. Some people love lots of text – others learn and communicate best face to face.
- There will be a range of different personality types in the network. Extroverts gain their energy from the outside world – they love interacting with people. Buzzy network meetings are bliss. Introverts prefer to process information internally, and like time to reflect. They may not be so happy to pitch into a room of strange people. (Though to be confusing you will find shy extroverts and socially bold introverts. How they behave may depend on how comfortable they are in their role in a network... which leads to the points below)
- The need to be open, honest and explicit. Joining a network with no clear structure or procedures can be a little intimidating. You aren't sure how to behave, what is acceptable, how decisions are made – or whether they are being made. Core members of the network should welcome, explain – and not operate as a clique.
- The activities of the network should cater for different communication preferences and personality types. Mix print, online and face to face. Ensure social events are well hosted.

Network resources

One of the biggest differences affecting how networks operate will lie in whether they have paid staff or not. How far that is necessary will depend upon:

- How focussed the network is. A group of passionate volunteers can achieve a great deal – but may need to keep their network (or is it a campaign group?) small to maintain cohesion.
- How far it is ‘doing’. Social, mutual support networks can operate successfully by – for example – simply rotating who hosts and organises meetings and running an email list.
- What communication methods members can use. If everyone is online it is relatively easy to put together an email newsletter and run a discussion list (see below). If members are experienced online users, you may be able to add in the use of joint calendars, file libraries and simple web pages run by one or more volunteers.
- How structured any learning may be. While volunteers may well organise workshops, and members may participate in online discussions, courses will usually require staff to develop and run.

While it may seem tempting to raise funds – or charge membership fees – in order to recruit staff and enhance network activities, this will throw up substantial challenges. This isn't the place to deal with employment law, but any network should think hard about liabilities and responsibilities of employment. Staff have to be managed. If staff resources are needed, could this be handled through an organisation that is a member of the network – provided there are clear agreements in place?

Sustainability

Networks do not have to be seen as ‘businesses’ with a formal structure and business plan, unless they have staff and projects. It is however, important to think about sustainability.

- Is the network a short-term initiative, or do you aim to be around in the longer-term?
- What will be the main ‘currency’? Are you planning to keep going on voluntary effort, or with paid staff – whether employed by the network or through another organisations?
- If voluntary – how can you best spread the load? Do there need to be any formal job/role descriptions? How can you maintain the motivation of the volunteers?
- If using paid staff, do you aim to fund-raise, charge membership fees, or earn revenue through projects?
- If you are charging fees, what are the specific membership benefits and services that you will be offering?

Communication tools

Networks depend on good communications. Some methods have been mentioned above. Here's a list of different methods and associated tools:

Address list or contacts database. Unless you have an organised means of contacting members, the network is unlikely to flourish. This may be a simple address list (postal and/or email); a searchable database; or profiles available to other members.

Newsletters. These could be print, or increasingly email. Email newsletters can be distributed either by simply mailing a list of addresses, or using a system which creates one forwarding postbox for those who sign up. These are provided free by systems like Yahoo <http://groups.yahoo.com/> and Smartgroups <http://www.smartgroups.com>

Journals, magazines, reviews. It may well be possible to publish one of these if you have a competent volunteer editor and a well-developed network with motivated members. An alternative may be to go for a web-based approach if all members are online. So....

Web site. Web sites are relatively easy to set up, but far more difficult to maintain. Before starting consider carefully the audience, the role of the site, and how often it will need to be updated. Is it going to serve mainly as a 'brochure' for the network? Will it be the equivalent of a magazine? Will members be able to publish their own material? See extranet below for more functions.

Events. These are worth a guide in their own right. Different approaches are needed for formal committees, creative workshops, lectures, socials, visits, conferences. Before deciding to hold an event, be clear on what it is for (e.g. information giving, learning, deciding, building relationships), and who should be there. Then consider the most appropriate venue, layout and style, management. Unfortunately people often go with what's familiar to them, so networks can struggle to operate in lecture rooms and committee rooms when they may need movable seats, flip charts, a facilitator and a bar.

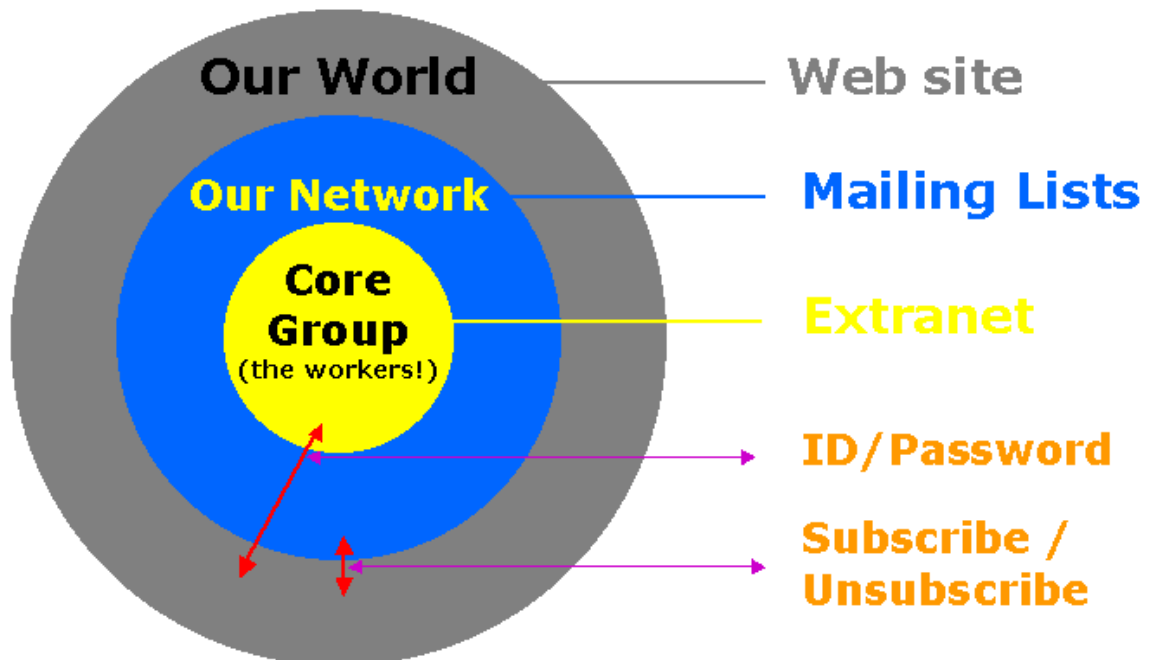
Telephone conferences. BT and other commercial organisations will provide facilities for, say, a dozen people to make a conference call. In the nonprofit sector <http://www.quest-net.org/> will organise your conference and provide a transcript. They need some pre-planning, and facilitation.

Extranets. If your members are all online – and relatively confident and skilled, you can combine a lot of different communication functions in an extranet. This is a system that integrates email, web, a profiles database, calendar, file library – and possibly more. It may be developed on a free, DIY basis using a system like Yahoo <http://groups.yahoo.com/> or Smartgroups <http://www.smartgroups.com>, or using the services of an Application Service provider like Virtual Business Networks <http://www.vbnonline.com>. In the nonprofit sector Networks Online <http://www.networksonline.org.uk> is a network of networks. A number of different organisations use the same system for the communication requirements, each with their private spaces, yet sharing some common information resources and management services.

Models

While your network may not operate entirely online, it will under-perform unless some online tools are used, even if only by a core group. Online systems like extranets also provide useful models for thinking about networks – because the Internet offers a powerful networking medium.

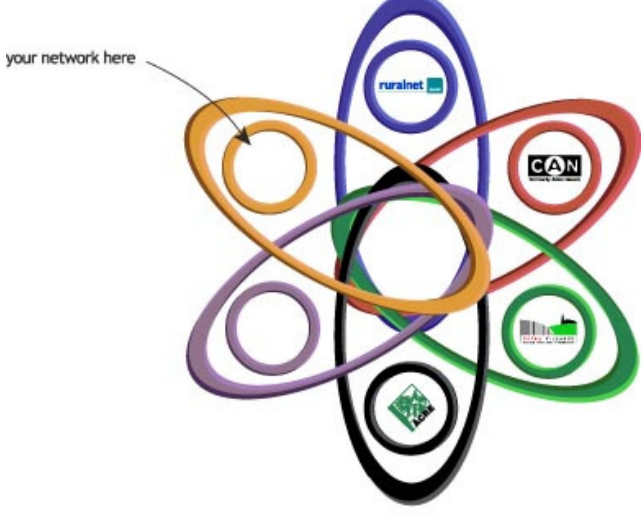
Technology for supporting networks



Source: Simon Berry 2000

This model, developed by Simon Berry of Network Online, shows how a different online tools can be used for a network with different levels of interest among members.

- The core group of the network is using a fully-functional extranet which is password protected
- The next 'ring' of members can subscribe/unsubscribe to email lists or web-based forums.
- The wider world with which the network wishes to engage can be offered a web site and, perhaps, an email newsletter.

 <p>your network here</p> <p>www.networksonline.org.uk</p>	<p>Network of networks</p> <p>Networks Online operates as a network of networks – a sort of sunflower in which each network is a petal. Each member network has its own private email system, discussion areas, calendars and file libraries,</p> <p>At the centre is technical support, common information resources, and other facilities that all members can access.</p>
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Development process

Network development should be seen as a process over time. The stages may be:

- **Inception.** Someone proposes the network. There is a spark to get it going. A few people get together.
- **Start up.** At this stage a core group should be engaging with others to clarify the purpose and activities of the network, and the resources it will need. People should socialise, get to know each other, try a few things. They may plan a launch event.
- **Operation.** The network recruits members, offers benefits, starts its events, communications.

Follow through. Either the network continues to grow and prosper, or declines. Either way members will need to reflect on whether they have strayed from their original purpose, and whether their activities and structure are still appropriate.

Roles

Companies and organisations need boards, chairs, secretaries, treasurers. Networks may need these if they are handling large sums and making significant decisions. But they certainly need:

- Convenors who organise get togethers
- Editors who manage communications content
- Moderators and facilitators who stimulate and manage interactions online and off.
- Hosts who help people feel welcome – whether at meetings or in online events

Network development checklist

This checklist can be used either to help you think through plans for your network, or develop a more formal brief. It is based on the 'Short guide to network development' that expands checklist topics. Points marked * indicate relevance to online working.

Scenario

If possible, please write a paragraph or two outlining the network – its purpose, membership, hoped for operation. You may find it easier to do this after running through the rest of the checklist.

(*What is the balance of 'real and virtual' working)

Development manager/team and process.

Who is planning the development of the network? When do you aim to launch? What sparked the development process? (*Does the manager team have online skills? How long is available to set up a system and train managers/users)

Who will be network members?

What is your target membership – how many? Open or closed? (*Affects scalability, access, security requirements)

How competent will the membership be online?

How skilled are members likely to be in using online tools (email, email lists, forums etc). (*Affects sophistication of the system, and needs for training and support)

What is the network for?

Sharing information, making contacts, learning? (*Determines what online tools will be needed)

Success

What would you count as success? Member endorsements? External recognition? (*Determines public visibility)

What will the network do?

Information exchange? Meetings? Projects? (*Determines what online tools will be needed)

Style and structure

How far will network operation be led by – say – a core group, or determined more organically by its members? (*Determines content management, administration, moderation)

Network resources

Will the network have any paid staff? If not, how will activities be organised? (*Determines sophistication of the system and how it is managed)

Sustainability

What is the 'business model'? Membership fees, voluntary effort, fund-raising? Short or longer-term? ? (*Determines sophistication of the system and how it is managed)

Communication tools

What communication methods do you have in mind? Print, online, face-to-face? (*Determines some functions of the online - e.g need for public-facing web site, document store, calendar)

Models

Are there any network models you have seen that appeal to you? (*Have these been drawn from online systems, mixed online-offline, or offline?)

The networks game

The purpose of the game is to help you create a plan for development of your network – using a mix of appropriate communication tools or activities. The cards and planning sheet for the game are downloadable at http://partnerships.typepad.com/usefulgames/2004/04/planning_a_netw.html

1 Create the scenario

Outline the network scenario – which may be real or fictitious

- Where will the network be operating?
- Who will be its members – and will it be open or closed?
- Why is it being established?
- What stage of development has it reached?
- What ‘fixes’ are there already in its operation?
- What staff/volunteers and other resources will it have?

2 Review the cards

The cards provide ideas for tools/activities that can be used in the network development process, and its operation. Each card has:

- A cartoon to distinguish it easily from others
- A brief description of the tool
- Needs - resources that would be needed to implement
- A budget point from 1-3. The costs of those marked with a * may be reduced if the network uses an established system rather than developing its own.

3 Play the cards

- Take out any cards that represent tools/activities you have already. They come free.
- Then choose cards up to a budget total of 12 that would help you build and run the network.
- Lay the cards along a timeline and priorities sheet. This is a matrix of short, medium, long term along the top, and high medium and low down the side.
- Add additional ideas and/or qualifications using Post-its. Indicate budgets.

4 Review resources

Look at the resource needs indicated on each of the cards that you have chosen

- Will it be possible to assemble those resources?
- Should you go for a DIY approach or aim to reduce costs and resource needs by using an existing system

- Who will lead development?