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# Your Network Determines Success More than You Realize

*Dave Lu*

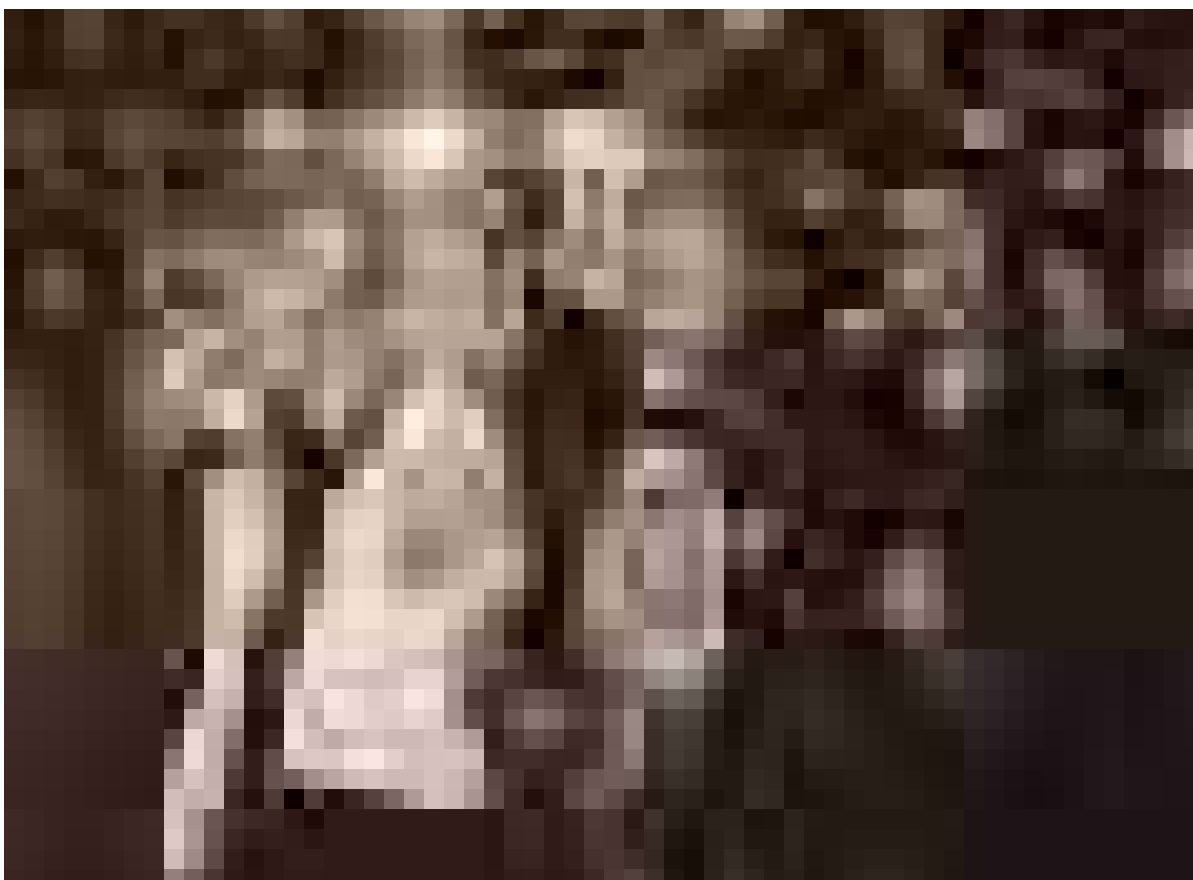
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I am an extrovert. I love meeting new people. As a result, I have been very fortunate to build an extensive network. The older I get, the more I realize how much this network has helped me get to where I am today. People underestimate the value of networking in their success. Most would say absolute success (vs. relative success) is the result of a combination of [talent, hard work and luck](#). If you don't have any talent, you are unlikely to offer anything of value to others. If you don't work hard, you can't hone your talent and build something of value. And even if you have all the talent in the world and you work non-stop, you need luck to get you exposure and opportunity. I would add that building the right network can increase your odds of success. In other words, **you can create your own luck when you have a strong network.**

I was inspired to write this post after coming across this article [Before Social Media Killed Hollywood Nightlife](#) in the Hollywood Reporter. I was fascinated by seeing all of these young actors cavorting in L.A. clubs before they became famous celebrities. I

wondered how many were already famous before these photos were taken and most were still unknowns at the time (circa 2001). You can see a photo of a young [Jason Momoa](#) ten years prior to his breakout role as Khal Drogo in Game of Thrones and now the billion dollar Aquaman. There's a photo of [Scarlett Johansson](#) who wouldn't have her breakout role in Lost in Translation until 2003. It would make sense if they were already celebrities that they would run in the same social circles, but that was not the case. It seems like too much of a coincidence that so many of the photos show so many young actors and actresses together before they made it. Obviously these are selective photos and there are probably dozens of others with people who didn't make it big, but the fact remains that these future Oscar-winners and blockbuster movie stars were connected before they were famous. One must wonder to what degree they helped one another get there along the way through introductions and access.





Punani Thursdays at The Lounge in the early 2000s drew (from left) Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, Gwen Stefani, now-cryptocurrency entrepreneur Les Borsai and, crouching, actor Taj Johnson. Source: Pantera Sarah

Just the other day, I was visiting the Gauguin exhibit at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco. I noticed that [Paul Gauguin was friends with Camille Pissarro](#) and it struck me how many of the masters were socially acquainted. I always thought that it was an odd coincidence that the great Impressionists were all friends (and they were most definitely not already famous at the time). In fact, most of them were rejects of the prestigious Paris Salon and were forced to exhibit their work at the Salon des Refusés (French for exhibition of rejects) in 1863. Paul Cézanne briefly attended the

Atelier Suisse with Camille Pissarro and in 1862 became lifelong friends with Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet. In 1894, he visited Monet in Giverny who introduced Cézanne to Auguste Rodin and critic Gustave Geffroy. Once again, it clearly is too much of a coincidence that all of these great artists knew one another before they became famous. A week after I saw the exhibit I came upon this timely article: [Artists Become Famous through Their Friends, Not the Originality of Their Work](#). This [interactive network diagram](#) from the MoMa demonstrates the power of connections with Wassily Kandinsky and Pablo Picasso in the center. The study performed by Columbia Business School professor Paul Ingram and his colleague Mitali Banerjee, of HEC Paris, found that “artists with a large and diverse network of contacts were most likely to be famous, regardless of how creative their art was...Specifically, the greatest predictor of fame for an artist was having a network of contacts from various countries.”







Andy Warhol, Photograph of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bryan Ferry, Julian Schnabel, Jacqueline Beaurang, Paige Powell, and others at a party Julian Schnabel's Apartment. Hedges Projects

Obviously it's hard to know whether these groups of friends would go on to succeed the way they did, but they clearly were talented. All of this assumes a minimum base level of talent in order to succeed or even be accepted into the network. I dreamed of being the first Asian-American NBA star as a ten year-old. But it wouldn't have mattered how many NBA scouts, GMs or owners I knew, because I didn't have the physical talent or basketball IQ to be Jeremy Lin (although I did have a mean jump shot). The point is that in order to improve your chances of success, you need to invest in your network. **Your network can grant you access to**

## opportunities.

You still need talent to succeed, but a lot of people are talented. Your network helps you break out by giving you a chance. If you look at the works of the great masters and objectively compare them to other artists of that time that did not become famous, I doubt you would really be able to tell the difference. There are many actors or singers who are just as talented as those who are celebrities, but they just never got their shot. Platforms like YouTube have somewhat leveled the playing field. You can go on YouTube and find tens of thousands of amazing voices and because of the disintermediation of record labels, more unknowns who didn't previously have access or a network have [managed to break out](#) (Justin Bieber, Alessia Cara, Shawn Mendes, etc.).

In the world of startups, your network grants you access to capital, talent, partnerships and much more. Access gives you a leg up on your competition and helps you win. Social capital leads to human capital and financial capital. When you know the right people you can recruit the best talent through your network and you can get in front of the best investors. [The PayPal Mafia](#) is the prime example of the power of your network. Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim were all at PayPal before starting YouTube which was funded by Sequoia partner Roelof Botha who was also at PayPal. Jeremy Stoppelman started Yelp with Russel Simmons and was funded by Max Levchin, all PayPal alumni. Yes, individually they were all talented and had the potential to succeed, but having those critical relationships improved their odds.

As an early employee at Yahoo!, I was fortunate enough to know many of those who went on to do amazing things. My friend [Albert Lee](#) was a fellow product manager who went on to build

[MyFitnessPal](#) into a \$500 million company and raised money from [Andrew Braccia](#), who was in business development with us at Yahoo! long before he became the influential partner at [Accel](#) that went on to invest in Slack, Etsy, HotelTonight, 99Designs and Braintree. Albert is now an investor in my company Pared. The [next generation of mafias](#) are coming out of the unicorns of Uber and Airbnb as some graduate to the venture world and others become founders that they invest in. Powerful networks such as Y Combinator, a handful of MBA programs and premium portfolios such as First Round Capital are force multipliers for these networks.

Networks grant access. Access increases opportunities. Capitalizing on opportunities leads to success. Timing and talent are important factors, but having the right network to leverage when you need it vastly improves your probability of success. In other words, like in surfing, you have to be in the right position to catch the big wave when it comes. Your network sets you up to take advantage of that wave instead of being behind and desperately paddling to catch up it.

There are no shortcuts to building a strong network. You can add all of the random connections on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn and your network could still be worthless. A network is only as strong as the individual relationships and connections you have. If you only have weak ties, it's unlikely you will be able to leverage them in a time of need. In other words, **quality > quantity**. The Silicon Valley mafias exist because those people went to war together in the trenches. They created strong bonds through good times and bad while building startups into empires. Not everyone can have that type of shared experience, but there are other ways you can build

your network with authentic connections:

## Create Value for Others

People want to connect with you if you have something of value to offer. This is where the talent comes into play, because hopefully you have something to offer! This doesn't have to be monetary or physical, it could be your expertise or access to your network. I get requests for introductions from friends and acquaintances all of the time because they see I'm connected to someone. I also get requests to meet up to give advice on building startups, growth marketing, fundraising, hiring and other insights from my personal experience. One way to amplify your expertise and value to others who are not in your sphere of influence is to blog or write thought leadership pieces (like this one!). If you can prove your content is worthy of the validation of the masses, people will ask you to speak on panels and do podcast interviews and more. This will continue to expand the audience who find value in your ideas. I recently wrote [one Medium post](#) about marketplaces that went viral and it was shared by influencers and people I respect but never interacted with before. The post led to new incredibly valuable relationships.

**When you create value for others, people will want to connect with you which will in turn increase the size and value of your network = Flywheel.**

## Stay Connected

Add people on LinkedIn because it is how other people will find value in your network. I get requests for introductions all the time to people I'm connected to. I only accept invitations or connections to people I've actually interacted with. That way I can always



reference that interaction or how we met when reaching back out again, even if it was years ago. Don't randomly accept all of the spammy invites you get from people wanting to connect because "I came across your profile and wanted to connect!" Ignore. You will only dilute your network if you accept random connections. When someone in the future asks you for an introduction to someone and you have no context or idea how you're connected, it will be very awkward to say you don't really know them. People use LinkedIn to measure the value of your network as a reflection of you. They subconsciously signal off of how many mutual connections you have and the quality of those connections. I'm not saying it's a perfect proxy for someone's talent or ability, but people use whatever cues they have to evaluate others worth, and your network is one of them.



At least put a little effort into it.

## Never Be Afraid to Ask

Not many people know this, but I've been friends with Guy Kawasaki for years. I was starting my first company at the time and was so inspired by reading [The Art of the Start](#) that I decided to cold e-mail him for his advice. He actually responded and we had

breakfast a week later. Over the years, we would get together and talk about social media and marketing. Guy is one of the best in the business of building a personal brand and I've learned so much from him. I would never have benefited from all of his sage wisdom if I hadn't e-mailed him. Never be afraid to reach out to someone, because the worst response you can get is a "no" or no response at all. You shouldn't take it personally because anyone worth getting to know is probably very busy. I can almost guarantee you that if you reach out to a busy CEO or influencer with a personalized e-mail about their product/service, book, essay, or speech that they will at the very least take the time to write a response. They might even respond with an invitation to have breakfast with them.

## **Don't Limit Yourself to One Network or Domain**

If you always socialize in the same circles, you will never expand your network. Seeing the same people regularly either because of shared industry, interests or geography limits the new relationships you can make. Spend time fostering relationships in different domains and industries. Andrew Chau, the founder of Boba Guys, is quite possibly one of the most well-connected people I know. Andrew has invested time and energy in building bridges across industries from food to politics to entertainment to fashion to sports to tech. His network is extremely valuable to many because its reach extends across the country and around the globe. By crossing over into different industries, he multiplies the number of other supernodes he is connected to which amplifies his network. The thing is, Andrew rarely asks for anything, he is always giving and creating value for others. Oftentimes this value comes from his connections and access. In other words, his network helps him

create value for his network (very meta). He also happens to be an ingenious marketer who is deeply plugged in to cultural trends.

## **Always Be Supportive**

Everyone appreciates it when you support them in their efforts no matter how much. If someone is launching a product, tweet about it or share it with your network. If someone is fundraising ask if you can be helpful with introductions. If someone has successfully fundraised, congratulate them publicly. If someone has news to share, help them share it to a wider audience. No matter who you are, when you have something you're trying to promote, you will always appreciate those who support you in your endeavors.

Whenever I publish a new essay on Medium, I'm always thankful to those who retweet it or share it because it drives more traffic and readership.

## **Say Yes and Don't Expect Anything in Return**

Be generous with your time. Your time is valuable, but if you only do things because you'll selfishly get something out of it, then you will often end up being disappointed. I am very intentional about being open to helping others. I don't help them because I expect anything in return, I do it because I can. Pay it forward. If I can help someone else with my expertise or network, then why wouldn't I meet with them? This openness has paid back dividends tenfold in what I've spent in time. People I've helped along the way have made incredibly valuable introductions, asked me to be an advisor, and have given me critical advice in return. Those who believe in karma can relate to this. Obviously you only have so many hours in the day so you can't always be responsive, but you can always be

open.

## Be Proactive and Connect Others

When you have an extensive network, you will have a lot of opportunities to connect people who would otherwise not intersect. As a node, you will be the only one who can see the valuable potential between two of your friends. Whether you're connecting a founder to an investor or a customer to a buyer, there are countless reasons to bring two people together. Malcolm Gladwell refers to these natural hubs and human supernodes in [The Tipping Point](#) as "connectors". By creating opportunities for others, people will be extremely grateful and may potentially return the favor down the road. Got rejected by Y Combinator or Stanford Business School? Start a force multiplying community of your own. Bring like-minded people together whether it be online or offline. When others see that you are a connector, they will refer more people to you and the group. Before you know it, you will have created a valuable network for yourself and more importantly for others.





Hunter Walk knows a lot of good people and is a proactive connector.

I hate “networking” as much as the next person. When I see a someone superficially schmoozing, I roll my eyes too. People can generally tell when someone is trying too hard and clearly just want something. The people with the strongest networks are the ones who build real relationships because those are the ties that you can count on. Friends always ask me how I know so many people. My superpower is that I have a somewhat photographic memory for faces which helps me to remember people, although this has declined with age. I could remember someone I met only briefly over twenty years ago or see a photo of someone and remember the context (this has definitely freaked people out). This has obviously been a powerful gift when building my network, but it’s more important that I remember the things that matter to people I meet because I care enough to remember. Be yourself. Be authentic. If you genuinely care about people, they will sense that.

**Invest generously in others and you will see returns for a lifetime.**

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