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Why it's a good career move to join a women's business network – new research

Published: September 1, 2022 6.45pm BST

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Women-only professional networks have become a familiar feature of the corporate world. Set up to organise and channel female voices and experiences, some have even become big businesses themselves.

Organisations like Driven Woman and Ellevate have international reach, and see themselves as a vital part of improving women's equality and status in business.

Of course, such groups are not without their critics. Some say they are not that useful (at least compared to traditional "old boys' networks", where men use their positions of influence to help others with a similar social or educational background) while others say they are elitist. They have even been described as "glorified knitting circles".

Yet the popularity of women's networks continues to grow. And, according to our recent research, with good reason.

By analysing online discussions of four large women's business networks in the US and the UK, we gained insight into the value they bring to the lives and careers of professional women. Overall we found them to be highly valued by their members, for offering both individual and collective strategies which help them to navigate workplaces that remain male-dominated.

One of the networks we looked at directly invites potential members to question the dominant status quo, asking: "Are you tired of traditional structures of top-down hierarchy and me-first competitive culture? The old patriarchal ways are falling down fast when women start creating the kind of environments where they flourish and thrive."

Our analysis showed that these networks are very effective at building such environments, and that the most obvious reason for joining one is probably the career support it can offer. For women at the beginning of their career, or returning from maternity leave or a sabbatical, previous research suggests that joining a global professional network can be critical.

Women who are part of these groups are more likely to be offered better jobs and secure promotions. The increased visibility achieved through networking can lead to women being paid higher salaries, and establishing a pathway to the most senior levels of an organisation. We found that women's business networks provide opportunities and resources which are pivotal for career development.

We also saw evidence of multiple benefits that came from being in touch with women from different industries and different steps in their careers. One popular advantage was the availability of psychological and emotional support, which some members said boosted their self-confidence – particularly when combined with the career advice that network members often share.

Taking the lead

Many networks also have mentoring programs, and actively encourage more experienced women to share details of their career paths. We found that senior female managers are equally keen to learn about – and meet – the next generation of women leaders.

As one woman stated on a network forum: "If you are not willing to help others in their search for success, how can you expect to get a lift yourself?"

"By sharing your journey and exposing your vulnerability you are actually putting your experiences out there for others to learn from. It's one of the greatest ways to help others."

Networks were also widely praised for valuing "intersectionality", a term which encapsulates the overlapping nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender. They often provide access to greater diversity of background and experience than their members may have been used to. Such interactions allowed women the opportunity to better address power and privilege at work and beyond.



Networking. Shutterstock/TZIDO SUN

As one entry from a network's blog claimed: "Every time I meet a group of driven women, I am struck by the wonderful variety of experiences and characters, backgrounds and dreams they have. Exploring with them what's been going on in their lives and where they're going next helps me to learn and improve too."

Taking a broader view, away from individual career development, we found that many network members see their networks as a way to make the business world a fairer place for women and girls. As one member commented: "For many years I was playing directly into the patriarchal game without ever noticing."

She added: "So next time you feel small, overwhelmed and confused, please remember this: it is not who you are. There's an enormous [amount] of energy and drive inside of you".

Overall then, we found that women's business networks are seen by their members as spaces that can bring about collective change and transformation, with immense professional and personal value. They are seen as a trustworthy and accessible source of advice and information on everything from improving work-life balance to motherhood, or working from home to starting a business – and providing a supportive environment in which to prosper.