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NETWORKING FROM SCRATCH: BUILDING A PROFESSIONAL NETWORK IN A NEW CONTEXT

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Bonita is a doctoral candidate in Human Resource Management at York University. She holds a BA (Hons.) Psychology from the University of Delhi, India and two Masters' degrees in Industrial Relations and in Occupational Psychology from the University of London, UK. She is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. Prior to academia, she worked in talent assessment and selection in the banking, police and government sectors. She is an active member of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and helped to organize the Robarts Summer Institute in 2025.

Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.

My research interests are job search and how people draw on their social networks to navigate job search. Previously, I qualified and worked as an Organizational Psychologist in the UK where I worked in Human Resources-Recruitment. Recruitment and job search could be considered two sides of the same coin: as an Organizational Psychologist in Recruitment, I designed multi-stage campus recruitment centres and assessments for mid-level and senior manager roles. Now, as a researcher studying job search, I look at how job seekers draw on their social networks to authentically and successfully navigate organizational recruitment processes.

Tell us about your research and how it relates to the study of Canada.

My research focus is how skilled migrant newcomers build professional networks to secure their first employment after arrival. In Canada, a critical employment concern is the overall unemployment rate, but other issues such as overqualification and underemployment, especially among newcomers, are also matters of concern.

Canadian government pre-employment programs increasingly recognize the value of social networks in helping job seekers achieve their employment goals. A few decades ago, social networks were mostly valued as leads for job opportunities. Today, however, we increasingly use our networks as critical sources of learning, advice, and insight. For example, we rely on friends, family, and trusted professional colleagues to review our CVs, practice our interview responses, and provide guidance on our professional presentation. Social media like LinkedIn have also substantially expanded our available networks and the people we can reach out to for advice and insight.

Job search can be challenging because it is not always a clearly codified process. Further, recruitment now heavily relies on AI and algorithmic sorting which can make it harder for a job seeker to understand

how to successfully and authentically secure a desired job. Yet, networking for job search is still not well understood especially among skilled migrant newcomers who often lack professional networks. One of my research aims is to contribute to government pre-employment and mentoring programs to further understand how to build and harness a professional network to secure appropriate employment.

How did you come to choose this research topic? What inspired you to do this work?

As an Organizational Psychologist, I had end-to-end sight of the entire recruitment process and what a job seeker must navigate. The recruitment process for a single job is often complex, spanning several weeks and multiple types of assessments. I simultaneously engaged with Hiring Managers, HR Recruitment Analysts, current employees in the role and prospective job candidates.

The experience helped me realize how even the best-suited candidates find job search stressful and how much they relied on their social networks to understand and navigate the process. While the lay stereotype of networking is often limited to asking for a direct referral, networking is also important from a learning perspective. Job seekers increasingly rely on in-person and online social networks for information and advice about navigating such important processes, but building and harnessing such a network, especially as a newcomer, is not well understood. I hope to address this gap and contribute to both practical pre-employment programs and the academic literature about social networks in job search.

What are three main takeaways you want others to come away with from your work?

1. Social networks are an important source of learning, advice, and insight, particularly for largely non-codified but critical life processes, such as job search.
2. Social networks are only useful if you make your goals and the specific kind of help you are looking for known. Canadian research has found friends, contacts and colleagues may not offer useful resources, not because they don't wish to help, but because they don't know you need it.
3. The earliest and one of the most influential research publications about social networks in job search began as a doctoral student's dissertation! This was the work of sociologist, Mark Granovetter, titled "The Strength of Weak Ties," published in the *American Journal of Sociology* (1973).

Tell us about the challenges that you as a researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.

I'm a mature student with care responsibilities, so my workday is often structured like a regular workday rather than structured as per my preferred time to work. Further, as a mature doctoral student who was coming back to university after a very long gap, I was surprised by how important—and how challenging—academic writing would be. Previously, I was accustomed to workplace and

business-focused writing, presentations and documents. Mastering the structure of academic writing—including transition sentences, abstracts, critical introductions, and "telling the story" to an academic audience unfamiliar with my specific subject area—required practice and patience. However, I also learned about writing from my experience as Teaching Assistant (TA) and Marker-Grader. Reviewing different types of student submissions, such as essays and exams, further helped inform my own writing and storytelling process.

Tell us about what you enjoy the most about the work you do.

I enjoy connecting the dots between ideas and thoughts which often seem unrelated on the surface but may share an important connection. Research allows me to discover such connections and relationships which I hope will also have practical and theoretical value.

What advice do you have for those starting their academic journey?

It's often hard to identify research interests, but I found a good starting point is to list the issues you worry about, or which annoy you, or the ones you get into passionate arguments about, prompting you to wonder, "Why doesn't somebody do something about this?" Studying and resolving concerns which are important to you helps you to maintain motivation and your reason for choosing to be a researcher.

Mature students need to consider the executive skills they bring to their academic journey. Many elements of modern work are also important in the PhD journey, such as a professional work ethic and expectations management. The benefit of previous work experience means you possibly already hold these executive skills which could transfer to your PhD. However, unlike most workplaces which are team-based, the early years of the PhD journey are often centred around the individual student. In work teams, everyone is dependent on each other to achieve team and business goals and individuals may often benefit from targetted and swift feedback to support performance improvements. This is different to the early PhD years where a student often needs to be very proactive in seeking feedback and developing and refining their academic skill set.

What are the next steps in your research?

I'm looking forward to data collection and to preparing for upcoming academic conferences.