

5 WAYS CFOS CAN INVEST IN AND BUILD THEIR NETWORK

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A robust network helps stimulate thought diversity that applies immediately to the challenges CFOs are facing.

Talent shortages, supply chain challenges, inflation, geopolitical risk. CFOs' calendars are overflowing with a seemingly unending series of challenges that have serious short- and long-term implications for their organizations. It doesn't seem like the most opportune moment to carve out time for developing and sustaining your professional network. But what are the implications if you don't?

Over the short term, you may be missing out on access to insights that can have an immediate impact on the most urgent challenges confronting your organization. How helpful would it be to have a group of trusted CFO peers at your disposal during this unique time? Peers who could offer advice and counsel; leaders who are sitting in your chair in their own organizations.

To give you an example, I regularly convene an informal gathering of CFOs who discuss the short- and long-term changes affecting their companies. In our last meeting, they shared best practices for confronting wage inflation without committing to permanent changes in compensation budgets. Each leader on that call came away with insights and ideas they otherwise would not have. Beyond that, because they have invested in building trust with one another, they regularly connect individually on issues where members of their peer group have expertise. Engaging in these peer networks allows a CFO to bring helpful new experiences and perspectives back to their companies.

Over the longer term, network building provides as much or more career development benefits to the CFO. Having a robust professional network provides valuable market insight, particularly related to interesting new roles and board positions. While access to talent has significantly increased through social media and technology, personal referrals and introductions still bolster a candidate's ability to stand out when it comes to recruitment at the C-level. Keeping one's head down cuts off an important channel for advancement.

What then can a time-strapped CFO do to keep, or ideally expand, their network in these increasingly challenging business conditions? Here are five ways to make the most of your networking:

- 1. Be intentional.** Given the limited time available to you, take a moment to think through what you would like to get out of your network. Is it career development, professional development, market insights, or knowledge? Knowing your objectives before you reach out will make for more targeted and meaningful conversations.
- 2. Keep it informal.** While there are a lot of great CFO conferences available to senior financial leaders, they can be difficult networking venues for all but the most extroverted of CFOs. Starting with smaller and more informal conversations often leads to more meaningful professional relationships.
- 3. Use your service provider contacts.** Your contacts at professional services firms can provide a wealth of useful information and connect you with key contacts in the market. Once you have your objectives in mind, start by asking some of your trusted advisors, accounting and law firms for example, whom they suggest you get to know. The best ones have a finger on the pulse of the CFO community and the orientation to help without expecting a quid pro quo.
- 4. Invest in creating trust.** Don't think of your budding CFO network as transactional. Focus on the long-term by investing in relationships and offering your knowledge and resources where appropriate. You will get a much higher return. It's obvious who is taking and who is giving in these interactions and those who are seen as willing to share invariably gain the most from their network.
- 5. Think long-term.** I brought together a group of professionals in my mid-20s where the only real thing we had in common was that we were sometimes perceived as being a bit too young for the level of responsibility we had at the time. Thirty years later, they have become my most valuable peer network. I still rely on them as clients, colleagues, and friends. Unfortunately, we no longer suffer the perceptions that brought us together (although we often wish we did).

So, when confronted with an endless string of 10-hour days, do yourself a small favor and take an hour or two to invest in yourself. Don't think of it as a completely self-serving exercise. Over the past two years, most of us have lived fairly insulated lives, both personally and professionally. We have worked so closely with our management teams dealing with crisis after crisis, that it's more than possible that our thinking has gotten stale.

New people and new networks stimulate a diversity of thought that applies immediately to the challenges our firms are facing. Unstructured conversations with a smart group of peers sharpen our skills to innovate more than any article or case study can because it exposes us to ideas being put into action. Not to mention, access to behind-the-scenes knowledge of what it took to get there and the lessons learned along the way.

But, in the end, this is more of an investment in you as a leader. One thing the pandemic has taught us is that meaning in our work is important. Finding meaning isn't always easy. It requires purpose. A robust network will help you test assumptions and help you identify where the market and your interests align.

You would advise any member of your team to take similar steps in their own careers so why not heed your own advice? It's an investment worth making.



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