

Benefits of networks

Networks create a number of benefits for their members and their stakeholders:

- Individual gains
- Community building
- Sharing and learning Coordination
- Joint action

Table 1 illustrates key aspects to consider when deciding which of these three types of networks could be set up: Informal Networks, Communities or Formal networks. These are loosely defined as follows:

Informal networks consist of informal individual, personal and amicable relations between businesspeople, peers, friends, or among members of a larger family. Typically, informal networks have no deliberately defined purpose. They grow organically and, in most cases, are not actively planned and managed. They play an important part in daily private and working lives: they are recreational, can yield information, ideas and experiences and render assistance in times of need. They form the basis on which communities or formal networks are built and often, but not always, informal networks operate on a short-term agenda.

Communities are groups of people or individuals who interact over time and are bound together by a shared need, interest or purpose. This provides the cornerstone for knowledge networks. Typically, communities are open to anyone who wants to participate. Members join communities to voluntarily share and develop their knowledge, solve common problems and support each other in finding answers. Communities offer the possibility of aligning efforts with like-minded individuals, enabling better division of work and responsibilities. Members have access to shared resources and have simple norms for determining access to those resources. There is also a shared context of social conventions, language, and values.

Formal Networks are interrelated groups of people or organisations that are established according to a specific design or need. These networks can also be embedded within organisations and can reach out beyond them. The members of the network share a common vision, objectives and rules, and they carry out a set of common activities. A formal network may even have a legal form or be transformed into an association. In contrast to communities, formal networks do not only respond to the needs and interests of members. Rather, they also have the goal of achieving changes in their own contexts, e. g. shaping the political agenda of countries, doing research-based advocacy or influencing policymaking.

Table 1.

Perceived benefits	Informal Networks	Communities	Formal Networks
Individual gains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition • Status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition • Status • Professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition • Status • Professional development • Profile
Community building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of belonging • Social ties • Personal connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of belonging • Social ties • Personal connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of belonging • Social ties • Personal connections • Partnerships
Sharing & learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interests • Perspectives • Ideas • Information • Experience • Know-how 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interests • Perspectives • Purpose • Vision • Objectives and goals • Information • Experience • Know-how • Expertise • Innovative solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interests • Perspectives • Purpose • Vision • Objectives and goals • Information • Experience • Know-how • Expertise • Innovative solutions
Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better division of work and responsibilities • Alignment of efforts • Access to resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better division of work and responsibilities • Alignment of efforts • Synergies • Infrastructure for widespread engagement • Pooling of resources

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource optimisation
Collaboration & joint action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agenda setting • Influence policy making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Influence policy making • Influence political agendas • Power of persuasion <p>Coherence</p>

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