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LITERATURE REVIEW

Organisational Networking in a Small-Sized HR Consultancy Academic Spin-Off: A Rapid Assessment of Literature Evidences

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A state-of-the-art rapid evidence assessment (REA) on organisational networking was performed during an internship at a small-sized human resource consultancy academic spin-off. Twenty-two studies were selected, reviewed, and assessed against level of methodological appropriateness and degree of feasibility for the targeted setting. Retrieved information encompassed networking effectiveness in enhancing organisational performance, effective networkers' individual characteristics, and implementable strategies to foster employees' networking capability. Networking turned out to be effective in promoting firms' performance. A "good networker" individual profile emerged, entailing personality and ability variables. Six pursuable actions to foster employees' networking capability were identified. Small-sized firms' managers can use results to scientifically inform the planning, design and implementation of activities aimed at exploiting networking.

Keywords: networking, HR, academic spin-off, REA, organisational psychology

Generally, networking can be defined as the behavioural process of making networks. In turn, a network can be defined as a set of linkages existing between a set of actors (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004, as cited in Rauch, Rosenbusch, Unger, & Frese, 2016), or "a process through which formal and informal collaborations are formed, creating channels through which information about other individuals and groups can be easily retrieved, tested, and verified" (Rauch et al., 2016; p. 555).

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Particularly referring to the business domain, literature from the fields of Business Psychology and Organisational Behaviour shows that several perspectives are adopted to define networking, suggesting it to be a multifaceted construct. Thus, professional networking is referred to as "the purposeful creation of social ties in support of tasks and professional goals" (Casciaro, Gino, & Kouchaki, 2014; p. 705). Similarly, managerial networking is defined as "the extent to which managers cultivate relationships with external entities" (Li & Zhang, 2007, as cited in Su, Xie, & Wang, 2015; p. 231), such as buyers, suppliers and competitors. The term political networking is deployed when organisations spend much effort in developing and maintaining good relationships with officials of governments and

their respective agencies (Su et al., 2015). Finally, financial networking occurs when organisations devote substantial resources towards relationships with financial institutions (ibid.).

Nowadays, networking seems to be the holy grail of the business world. Every time a company is struggling in contacting new hires, either customers, employees, interns or, ultimately, any kind of resource coming from the external market, networking appears to be the best solution. This is especially the case when reading pop-science literature (Byham, 2009; Clark, 2014; Ibarra & Hunter, 2007; Knight, 2015).

To scientifically verify networking's worthwhileness for organisations, the current study aimed to provide a comprehensive and structured overview on the best available knowledge regarding this topic, especially looking at networking effectiveness in fostering organisational performance. Furthermore, the paper aimed to shed light on who may be better at networking as compared to others, namely networkers' individual characteristics, and on how people should actually network, such as implementable networking strategies.

This was done in the spirit of an integration and mutual information between science and practice (Jones & Mehr, 2007; Murphy & Saal, 1990) where practice provides science with matters to investigate about, and science provides practice with indications on how to make the most out of retrieved knowledge and collected evidences. Particularly, a set of principles known as *Evidence-Based Management* (EBMgt; Barends, 2015; Briner, Denyer, & Rousseau, 2009; Rynes & Bartunek, 2017) was adopted as an approach to address the posed issue. Generally, evidence-based practice is about making decisions through the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best and most up-to-date evidence possibly available (Barends, 2015). So, the very core of the "evidence-based" concept is grounding one's decision-making processes on what the currently available scientific knowledge suggests. Analogously, EBMgt (Briner et al., 2009) is about making HR decisions through the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the following four sources of information: 1) practitioner expertise and judgement; 2) evidence from the real context; 3) critical evaluation of the best available research evidence; and 4) perspective of those people who might be affected by the decision. The current paper aims to provide the third kind of evidence-based HR decisions source, such as a critical evaluation of available research evidence.

Consistently, a state-of-the-art *Rapid Evidence Assessment* (REA; Barends, Rousseau, & Briner, 2017; Briner & Denyer, 2012), which is a literature review method deriving from EBMgt principles, was conducted to quickly retrieve the available and practically usable scientific literature knowledge on networking effectiveness for organisational performance, networkers' individual characteristics, and implementable networking strategies.

Results from the present study can be used by practitioners and managers as a reliable knowledge base to design organisational interventions aimed at improving their own and employees' networking capability, as well as by managers and employees who want to properly engage in networking behaviours.

Methods

In order to fully understand the rationale associated to the methodological choices made in the current study, readers will need to be provided with some contextualisation (Nielsen & Miraglia, 2016) about where and why the described research activity was performed. That is, the main input for the present paper derives from a three-months curricular internship experience carried out by the author during Spring 2018 within the framework of the European Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree in Work, Organizational, and Personnel Psychology (Martínez-Tur, Peiró, & Rodríguez, 2014). The internship was hosted by a small-sized HR consultancy firm located in Flanders, legally constituting a spin-off of a prestigious Belgian university, and providing national-level business-to-business (B2B) services aimed at supporting HR departments' major functions both in private and public or governmental organisations.

The opportunity to observe on the field, although

informally, the firm's need for a solution regarding networking issues, was indeed provided by the daily working life itself. At the time the present research was carried out, the following three factors were arguably accountable for the firm's networking difficulties: 1) *organisational age*, meaning that, as a three-year-old organisation (i.e., a young one according to the major age taxonomies overviewed by Noordin & Mohtar, 2014), the firm's reputation building was still in progress, which could be making the firm not yet well-known on the business market, thus negatively affecting its networking outcomes; 2) *organisational size*, since, as a four-employees-sized organisation, the firm struggled to contemporarily get the work done and take care of relationships with external actors; and 3) *market size*, meaning that the firm was operating in a peculiar HR consultancy sub-field (i.e., EBMgt), which still today is a little niche market, having not yet reached a tipping point into expanded consensus and adoption as other HR services have done, or as evidence-based practice has done in different fields (Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007; Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996; Sherman, 2018).

Based on these premises, a state-of-the-art REA (Barends et al., 2017) was performed. REA is a rigorous method to efficiently search, critically appraise and effectively synthesise empirical evidences from studies in the scientific literature about an intervention, problem or practical issue, finally providing a balanced assessment of what is known and not known (Barends et al., 2017). This method was used as it offers a more structured approach than a traditional non-systematic literature review, and it is less time- and effort-consuming than other protocols (e.g., systematic reviews or meta-analyses; Higgins & Green, 2008; Hunter & Schmidt, 2004; Moher et al., 2015). Also, by providing a scientific knowledge ground, it maximises validity and reliability of derived organisational intervention design processes. Also, it ensures research transparency and reproducibility (Galetzka, 2019; Munafò et al., 2017).

Search Strategy

REA was conducted stepwise.

As a first step of the REA, research questions to be answered were identified. There were three clusters of them, such as: 1) *Networking Effectiveness*: Would networking be useful to tell customers about firms' services? Should firms implement networking strategies or solutions, or not? If so, why? How would networking affect firms' organisational performance and success? 2) *Networkers' Characteristics*: How is networking affected by individual differences? What are the individual characteristics of a good networker? 3) *Networking Strategies*: What are the most used methodologies in the field of networking? What networking strategy or solution is more effective? How should firms network?

As a second step of the REA, an initial set of keywords was heuristically brainstormed. These were "networking", "organisational networking", "corporate networking", "company networking", "business networking", "professional networking", "success", "performance", "organisational success", "organisational performance", "personality", "personality differences", "individual differences", "methods".

As a third step of the REA, based on the above keywords, four queries were made up. These are shown in Table 1.

As a fourth step of the REA, a suitable bibliographical database was chosen. In the present study, Web of Science (WoS) was chosen because of its broad coverage (Mingers & Leydesdorff, 2015).

As a fifth step of the REA, inclusion criteria were established. These prioritised meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews over single studies to mostly collect high-quality evidences (Barends et al., 2017). Nevertheless, single studies were included only if satisfying at least one of the following three conditions: 1) the study provided answers to the "how should firms network?" research question, meaning that it encompassed networking solutions, tools, strategies or practices that were useful to gather concrete indications or design organisational interventions; 2) the study reported boundary conditions for networking effectiveness or variables moderating or mediating the relationship between networking and organisational performance, success or innovation; and 3) the study referred to very similar

organisational contexts to the actual firm involved, such as university spin-offs or start-ups.

As a sixth step of the REA, exclusion criteria were established. That is, studies were excluded if: 1) not written in English; or 2) not even partially answering the previously identified research questions.

As a seventh step of the REA, the four queries were inserted in the WoS search engine, one at a time, thus generating a total of four searches launched (Table 1). Refinements were made by document type (Article or Review) and WoS category (Business or Psychology Applied or Management) in order to meet both the research questions and the inclusion criteria. Timespan was not restricted. This operation (April 23rd, 2018) yielded an initial amount of 634 articles.

As an eighth step of the REA, each abstract of the 634 articles was checked to assess the extent to which each single article met the research questions, and both the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This operation left a final sample of 22 papers (see Appendix A) which were deemed relevant. Appendix A provides a complete reference list of the selected papers.

As a ninth step of the REA, each of the selected 22 papers was processed in depth.

Table 1. Queries and counts of retrieved and selected articles

Query	Results	Relevant
networking AND (meta-anal* OR "systematic review*")	142	7
networking AND ("corporate* performance" OR "corporate* success" OR "compan* performance" OR "compan* success" OR "organi?at* performance" OR "organi?at* success*")	342	5
("networking behav*" OR "networking strateg*" OR "organi?ational networking" OR "corporate networking" OR "company networking" OR "business networking" OR "professional networking") AND (personalit* OR "personal* difference*" OR "individual* difference*" OR "personal* attribute*" OR "individual* attribute*" OR identit* OR attitude* OR mindset)	34	1
("networking behav*" OR "networking strateg*" OR "organi?ational networking" OR "corporate networking" OR "company networking" OR "business networking" OR "professional networking") AND (method* OR resource* OR application* OR solution* OR practice* OR activit* OR routine* OR train* OR skill* OR abilit*)	116	9
Total	634	22

Note. Additional unforeseen exclusion criteria were applied based on contents encountered during search, such as studies: 1) conceiving networking as relationships among employees belonging to the same organisation or different branches of it, namely internal social capital; 2) on culturally-specific HRM practices, such as Chinese Guanxi, South African Ubuntu, Korean Yongo, Yonjul and Inmaek, Russian Sviazi; 3) on public administration issues as not relevant for the involved organisational context; 4) on networking in school settings; 5) on networking for creating a profile of new occupational groups and professions; 6) on social media networking behaviour; 7) on networking as a job search strategy; 8) on the relationship between networking and career success; 9) on Enterprise Social Networks, namely internally accessible social networking services for supporting knowledge management and collaboration; 10) on methodological issues concerning social network research in organisations; 11) on organisational contexts very different from the involved firm, such as public administration or non-profits; 12) single studies' redundant information as compared to meta-analyses, systematic reviews or other higher-quality study types; * = command to the bibliographical search engine to retrieve both the singular and the plural form, and both the British and the American spelling of the final part of a word; ? = command to the bibliographical search engine to retrieve both the singular and the plural form, and both the British and the American spelling of a middle part of a word.

As a tenth and final step of the REA, selected papers were classified according to the six-levels system for evidences' trustworthiness by Petticrew and Roberts (2008) and Shadish, Cook, and Campbell (2002), which is also reported in Barends et al. (2017).

That is, trustworthiness of the selected papers, namely their validity and reliability, was judged and determined based on the methodological appropriateness of each of them. In this framework, studies falling lower in the ranking of appropriateness are those whose study design has the greatest chances of showing bias in their results, and vice versa. Table 2 shows such classification.

Table 2. Trustworthiness and methodological appropriateness of selected papers

Design	Level	N. Articles
Longitudinal	B	3
Meta-analysis, Systematic review	C	8
Cross-sectional	D	9
Traditional literature review, Theoretical paper	E	2

Note. Overall level of the evidences' trustworthiness was medium. No AA-level studies (i.e., systematic reviews or meta-analyses of randomised controlled studies) nor A-level studies (i.e., systematic reviews or meta-analyses of non-randomised controlled and/or before-after studies, and randomised controlled studies) were among the selected papers.

As for descriptive information, studies were all fairly recent (2004–2017), with the majority (Figure 1) published in 2015.

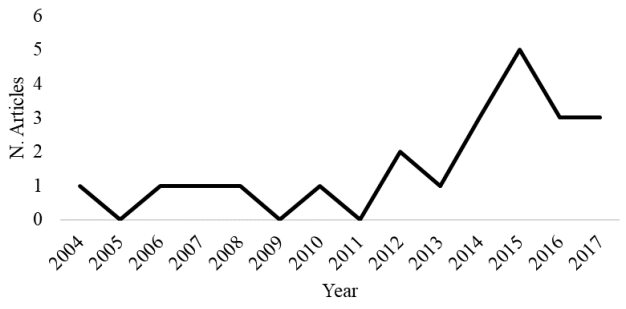

Figure 1. Issue years of the selected papers.

Table 3 and Table 4 show the extent of the variety of informational sources (17 journals, 8 publishers) suggesting absence of the common source bias (Campbell & Fiske, 1959).

Table 3. Sources of information (journals)

Journal	N. Articles	Per-centage
Canadian Journal of Administrative Science	1	4.5%
Corporate Communications: An International Journal	1	4.5%
IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management	1	4.5%
Industrial Marketing Management	5	22.7%
International Journal of Innovation and Technology Management	1	4.5%
International Journal of Management Reviews	1	4.5%
Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing	1	4.5%
Journal of Business Research	1	4.5%
Journal of Business Venturing	2	9.8%
Journal of Organizational Behavior	1	4.5%
Journal of Vocational Behavior	1	4.5%
Management Science	1	4.5%
Organization Science	1	4.5%
Personnel Psychology	1	4.5%
Psychology & Marketing	1	4.5%
Revista Brasileira de Gestão de Négocios	1	4.5%
The International Journal of Human Resource Management	1	4.5%
Total	22	100

Note. Variety of the sources of information (journals) was broad enough to suggest that no common source bias would have occurred.

Table 4. Sources of information (publishers)

Publisher	N. Journals	Percentage
Elsevier	4	23.4%
Emerald	2	11.8%
FECAP	1	5.9%
IEEE	1	5.9%
Informs	2	11.8%
Taylor & Francis	1	5.9%
Wiley	5	29.4%
World Scientific	1	5.9%
Total	17	100

Note. Variety of the sources of information (publishers) was broad enough to suggest that no common source bias would have occurred. A personal inquiry as to whether any of the publishers exists as mutual subsidiaries to a parent company has yielded no such confirmation.

Results

The present section reports the results retrieved by processing in depth each of the selected articles. The section is organised by three sub-paragraphs. The first sub-section reports results about effectiveness of networking in promoting organisational performance. The second sub-section reports results about individual features displayed by effective networkers. Finally, the third and last sub-section reports the emerged strategies that can be implemented to network, along with results about their effectiveness.

Effectiveness of Networking for Organisational Performance

Three meta-analyses (Rauch et al., 2016; Stam, Arzlanian, & Elfring, 2014; Wang, Zhao, Li, & Li, 2015) showed positive and statistically significant correlations between entrepreneurial networks and small firm performance (respectively: k = 68, N = 16364, r = .18, *95% CI* = .12, .18; k = 61, N = 13263, r = .21, *95% CI* = .10, .21; k = 11, N = 3626, r = .13, *95% CI* = .09, .16). Additionally, the meta-analysis by Wang and colleagues (2015) reported a positive and statistically significant (*95% CI* = .19, .24) correlation between entrepreneurial networks and small firm innovation (k = 11, N = 5417, r = .22). A systematic literature review (k = 20) by Pittaway, Robertson, Munir, Denyer, and Neely (2004) identified risk sharing, obtaining access to new markets and technologies, speeding products to market, pooling complementary skills, safeguarding property rights when complete or contingent contracts are not possible, and acting as a key vehicle for obtaining access to external knowledge, as the principal benefits of networking, concluding that it is an important factor for firms' innovation performance and productivity. A systematic literature review (k = 55) by Poponi, Braccini, and Ruggieri (2017) reported networking capital as one of the main factors affecting academic spin-offs' performance. Similarly, a longitudinal study (N = 149) by Walter, Auer, and Ritter (2006) showed networking capability to positively and statistically significantly predict sales growth (β = .03, $p \leq .05$), sales per employee (β = .03, $p \leq .05$), profit attainment (β = .12, $p \leq .01$), perceived customer relationship quality (β = .04, $p \leq .05$), realised competitive advantage (β = .07, $p \leq .01$), and security long term survival (β = .18, $p \leq .001$) of academic spin-offs. Finally, a longitudinal study (N = 100) by Raz and Gloor (2007) reported a statistically significant ($p \leq .05$) correlation between communication network size and start-ups' survival (r = .24).

Table 5 schematises the above-mentioned results about relationships between networking and organisational performance indicators.

The following boundary conditions emerged as somehow affecting networking effectiveness. Particularly, the meta-analysis by Rauch and colleagues (2016) showed that performance of new rather than old firms was slightly higher within cohesive (k = 18, N = 6636, r = .17) rather than diversified networks (k = 16, N = 5174, r = .16). Similarly, performance of small- rather than large-sized firms was slightly higher within cohesive (k = 17, N = 5021, r = .18) rather than diversified networks (k = 20, N = 5113, r = .16).

Table 5. Relationships between networking and organisational performance indicators

Outcome	Reference	Study Design	*k*	*N*	*r*	β	*95% CI*
Small firm performance	Rauch et al., 2016	Meta-analysis	68	16364	.182	-	.118–.179
"	Stam et al., 2014	"	61	13263	.211	-	.105–.208
"	Wang et al., 2015	"	11	3626	.127	-	.094–.159
Small firm innovation	"	"	"	5417	.217	-	.190–.244
Risk sharing	Pittaway et al., 2004	Systematic literature review	20	-	-	-	-
Access to new markets and technologies	"	"	"	-	-	-	-
Speeding products to market	"	"	"	-	-	-	-
Pooling complementary skills	"	"	"	-	-	-	-
Safeguarding property rights	"	"	"	-	-	-	-
Access to external knowledge	"	"		-	-	-	-
Academic spin-off performance	Poponi et al., 2017	Systematic literature review	55	-	-	-	-
Sales growth	Walter et al., 2006	Longitudinal	-	149	-	.03*	-
Sales per employee	"	"	-	"	-	"	-
Profit attainment	"	"	-	"	-	.12**	-
Perceived customer relationship quality	"	"	-	"	-	.04*	-
Realised competitive advantage	"	"	-	"	-	.07**	-
Security long-term survival	"	"	-	"	-	.18***	-
Start-ups' survival	Raz & Gloor, 2007	"	-	100	.24*	-	-

Note. *k* = number of samples; *N* = samples size; *r* = correlation coefficient; *β* = regression coefficient; *95% CI* = confidence interval; - = not provided by the original external source; " = as in the previous cell of the column; ***$p \leq .001$; **$p \leq .01$; *$p \leq .05$.

Individual Features of Networkers

As for personality traits, a meta-analysis by Fang and colleagues (2015) using 138 independent samples found self-monitoring (β = .15, $p \leq .001$), neuroticism (β = –.08, $p \leq .01$), and conscientiousness (β = .07, $p \leq .01$) to be significant predictors of instrumental networks' in-degree centrality, operationalised as the number of incoming ties an individual receives from others. The same study found extraversion (β = .09, $p \leq .01$) and conscientiousness (β = .13, $p \leq .001$) to significantly predict instrumental networks brokerage, defined as the extent to which an individual is connected to people or clusters of people who are not connected. Also, a cross-sectional study (N = 53) by Anderson (2008) found that an effective network size was positively (β = .28) and significantly ($p \leq .05$) predicted by need for cognition. Specifically, effective network size was measured as the number of an actor's contacts discounted by the extent to which the actor's contacts know one another, thus preventing redundancy of information benefits.

As for individual abilities, a meta-analysis by Munyon, Summers, Thompson, and Ferris (2015) using 12 independent samples found a significant (*95% CI* = .13, .35) correlation between a behavioural tendency named networking ability and task performance (k = 130; r = .27). Finally, two cross-sectional studies (Naudé, Zaefarian, Tavani, Neghabi, & Zaefarian, 2014; Torres-Coronas & Vidal-Blasco, 2017) found positive and significant ($p \leq .01$) relationships between emotional intelligence and entrepreneurs' proactive external networking behaviour (respectively: N = 53, β = .27; N = 42, r = .60).

Table 6 reproduces the above-mentioned results about relationships between personality traits, individual abilities and networking.

Implementable Networking Strategies

Networking behaviours. A cross-sectional qualitative study (N = 31) by Thornton, Henneberg, and Naudé (2013), and a subsequent validation study by Thornton, Henneberg, and Naudé (2014), described four types of organisational networking behaviours, each of them having three sub-types, namely: 1) *information acquisition*, reported as organisations acquiring necessary or desired information for helping make informed decisions via business

Table 6. Relationships between personality traits, individual abilities and networking

Predictor	Reference	Study Design	*k*	*N*	*r*	β	*95% CI*
Personality Traits							
Self-monitoring	Fang et al., 2015	Meta-analysis	138	-	-	.15***	-
Neuroticism	"	"	"	-	-	-.08**	-
Conscientiousness	"	"	"	-	-	.07** (centr.) .13*** (brok.)	-
Extraversion	"	"	"	-	-	.09**	-
Need for cognition	Anderson, 2008	Cross-sectional	-	53	-	.28*	-
Individual Abilities							
Networking ability	Munyon et al., 2015	Meta-analysis	130	-	.27	-	.13–.35
Emotional intelligence	Naudé et al., 2004	Cross-sectional	-	53	-	.27**	-
"	Torres-Corona & Vidal-Blasco, 2017	"	-	42	.603**	-	-

Note. k = number of samples; N = samples size; r = correlation coefficient; β = regression coefficient; *95% CI* = confidence interval; - = not provided by the original external source; " = as in the previous cell of the column; ***$p \leq .001$; **$p \leq .01$; *$p \leq .05$; centr. = instrumental networks' indegree centrality; brok. = instrumental networks brokerage.

(*trading relationships*), business contacts (*non-trading relationships*), and/or trade events; 2) *opportunity enabling*, referred to as organisations sensing the opportunities and building reputation by consciously interacting with relevant parties in the business sphere through networking events, lobbying, and/or signalling self-perceived network identity; 3) *strong-tie resource mobilisation*, meant as organisations mobilising resources that are linked to direct and established relationships through adjusting resources, transferring resources, and/or pooling resources; and 4) *weak-tie resource mobilisation*, intended as organisations mobilising resources that are linked to indirect and less established or novel relationships through bridging weak-tie relationships, bypassing-flanking, and/or bypassing-avoidance. The effectiveness of these behaviours was argued to vary depending on organisational circumstances, such as organisational characteristics, self-perceived network identity and network dynamics.

Recruitment and selection. A traditional literature review (Jolink & Dankbaar, 2010) held that personnel recruiting and selection can be network-oriented, meaning that networking abilities and experiences are explicitly part of the job announcement, job description and the process itself. For instance, the selection process for job positions where networking is important can include assessing candidates' personality characteristics and individual abilities that are shown to positively affect networking.

Networking events. A cross-sectional qualitative study (Mitchell, Schlegelmilch, & Mone, 2016; $N = 35$) concluded that attending business networking events not only create professional and learning value for the organisation via the individual, but also personally for the individual in the shape of social, emotional, and hedonic value.

Social media. A systematic literature review by Alves, Fernandes, and Raposo (2016; $k = 44$) held that Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly deployed social media in companies' marketing strategies since they hold the capacity to impact a firm's market value and, furthermore, enable and empower word of mouth. A cross-sectional study by Fieseler and Ranzini (2015) clustered four impression management strategies used by communication managers on social media, such as: 1) *self-promotion*, namely stressing one's own and one's firm professionalism, highlighting how dedicated one is to his or her work, showing others how hard-working one and one's firm are, talking about one's or one's firm personal success, mentioning one's virtues and positive traits, and talking about one's participation in group achievements; 2) *assistance seeking*, that is pointing out the limits of one's knowledge so that others will help, avoiding being intimidating while sharing knowledge with others, showing vulnerability to obtain people's assistance or sympathy, and directly asking for assistance; 3) *peer support*, reported as complimenting people on their achievements, trying to make others happy, and paying attention to people's needs and concerns; and 4) *authority*, namely addressing people limiting one's ability to get the job done, showing annoyance when someone pushes one too far, underplaying one's own knowledge to avoid unpleasant assignments, and sanctioning contacts when behaving inappropriately. An exploratory qualitative case study by Bocconcelli, Cioppi, and Pagano (2017) found the adoption of social media resources helpful for a firm to tap into new markets and thus address the original market downturn. Alves and colleagues (2016) also noticed that social media usage in B2B context still proves limited in scope.

Networking behaviour training. An intervention study by Spurk, Kauffeld, Barthauer, and Heinemann (2015; $N = 81$) conceptualised networking behaviour as a malleable and developable behavioural tendency to build career-related social networks based on personal motivation. Results showed no statistically significant differences across T1 (before a networking behaviour training) and T2 (after the training) between the target and the control group.

Network capability scale. Walter and colleagues (2006) defined network capability (NC) as "a firm's ability to develop and utilize inter-organisational relationships to gain access to various resources held

by others" (p. 542). They proposed the 19-items Network Capability Scale (NCS; Walter et al., 2006) where NC is conceived as a four-dimensional construct composed of 1) *coordination*, referring to a set of boundary-spanning activities connecting the firm to other firms, and linking different individual relationships into a network of mutually supportive interactions; 2) *relational skills*, such as a set of social competences to manage interpersonal exchange situations, which very frequently occur in the context of business networking; 3) *market knowledge*, which is an organised and structured information about business partners and competitors, allowing a mindful management of relationships with these actors; and 4) *internal communication*, which means assimilating and disseminating up-to-date information on partners and competitors within the firm, which helps avoid redundant processes and miscommunication, as well as, improves detection of synergies between partners. As such, NCS might be used as an assessment tool to start designing tailored organisational interventions related to networking.

Discussion

Following the description of the results that came out from the performed literature review, retrieved evidences need to be comparatively assessed based on the six levels of the evidences' trustworthiness evaluation system by Petticrew and Roberts (2008) and Shadish, Cook, and Campbell (2002). Additionally, networking strategies' suitability for the targeted organisational context need to be assessed based on the degree of feasibility, namely the fit to the analysed firm. These evaluations are presented in the paragraphs below.

First of all, several reliable evidences accounted for networking as effectively promoting organisational performance (Pittaway et al., 2004; Poponi et al., 2017; Rauch et al., 2016; Raz & Gloor, 2007; Stam et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2015). These were two longitudinal studies (level B), three meta-analyses (level C), and two systematic literature reviews (level C). Studies took place in small firms, academic spin-offs or start-ups, therefore being highly representative of the small-sized HR consultancy academic spin-off which the performed research activity referred to.

Secondly, the processed articles provided a sort of individual networker profile entailing personality and ability variables. Among personality traits, it was found that a highly self-monitoring, highly conscientious and lowly neurotic networker is likely to receive a greater number of incoming ties from other people as compared to a lowly self-monitoring, lowly conscientious and highly neurotic networker (Fang et al., 2015). Also, a networker showing high extraversion, high conscientiousness and a high need for cognition was shown to be more likely to be connected to people who do not know each other, which is good in terms of variety and diversity of information the networker can get from his or her connections (Anderson, 2008; Fang et al., 2015). Among individual ability variables, good and emotionally intelligent networkers were shown to be high in task performance and proactive external networking behaviours (Munyon et al., 2015; Naudé et al., 2014; Torres-Coronas & Vidal-Blasco, 2017). The associated studies were two meta-analyses (level C) and three cross-sectional studies (level D). Therefore, on the one hand, retrieved studies about networkers' individual characteristics can be globally deemed to be sufficiently trustworthy, if considered in isolation. On the other hand, their level of trustworthiness turns out to be slightly lower than that globally associated with retrieved studies about networking effectiveness for the promoting of organisational performance.

Finally, scientific literature provided six pursuable actions to foster employees' networking capability and behaviours, such as: 1) *networking behaviours* (Thornton et al., 2013; Thornton et al., 2014), presented by one cross-sectional qualitative study (level D) and one validation study (level D); 2) *recruitment and selection* (Jolink & Dankbaar, 2010), supported by one traditional literature review (level E) and pointing out a solution which can be expensive especially for small-sized firms; 3) *networking events* (Mitchell et al., 2016), retrieved from a cross-sectional qualitative study (level D) and difficult to realise for a very small-sized firms, since planning to systematically and frequently participate in networking events, and subsequently doing so,

might compromise getting the work in a proper and timely manner; 4) *social media* (Alves et al., 2016; Bocconcelli et al., 2017; Fieseler & Ranzini, 2015), entailed by one systematic literature review (level C), one cross-sectional study (level D), and one exploratory qualitative case study (level E) drawing ambiguous conclusions about effectiveness of social media usage in B2B and taking place in a mechanical selling company, which is not very representative of a small-sized HR consultancy academic spin-off; 5) *networking behaviour training* (Spurk et al., 2015), implemented by an intervention study (level B) but proving no effectiveness in fostering networking behaviour; and 6) *NCS* (Mitrega et al., 2012; Mu & Di Benedetto, 2012; Munyon et al., 2015; Walter et al., 2006), supported by an arguably considerable amount of fairly reliable empirical evidences, such as one longitudinal study (level B), one meta-analysis (level C) and two cross-sectional studies (level D), with the longitudinal study being carried out within the highly representative context of university spin-offs.

Based on the balanced assessment above between methodological appropriateness and feasibility, it can be concluded that, overall, networking is a worthwhile option for organisations to stick with, since it proves effective in promoting different performance indicators.

To this end, personality and ability variables may play an important role. Therefore, especially networking-related abilities may be trained among managers and employees carrying out networking-related jobs. Also, such abilities may be prioritised when assigning managers and employees to networking-related jobs.

Finally, among the evaluated implementable networking strategies, the NCS turned out to be the best scientifically supported and practically usable, being in fact costless and little time-consuming. NCS constitutes a diagnostic instrument to determine whether a firm scores high or low on the ability "to initiate, maintain and utilize relationships with various external partners" (Walter et al., 2006; p. 546). Since its items measure the extent to which the considered networking activities are actually carried out by the firm, NCS may be used as tool to derive concrete instructions and indications on what to do. For instance, NCS might be kept as an organisational asset to be consulted periodically to check one's organisation's networking health status. This might ultimately be done autonomously by firm members without necessarily the presence of an expert facilitator or organisational psychologist.

Overall, the described research activity fits the integration and mutual information between science and practice (Jones & Mehr, 2007; Murphy & Saal, 1990) which, in the current study, was pursued to the best of the author's ability. Also, since performing of REAs establish a fundamental overlap between science and practice, it endorses the usefulness of EBMgt principles (Briner et al., 2009) originally chosen as an approach to tackle critical networking issues.

Limitations

The current study has some limitations. On the methodological side, the performed REA relies only on the WoS bibliographical database, whereas a systematic literature review using additional informational sources (e.g., Scopus, etc.) might bring more exhaustive or alternative knowledge, and therefore eventually lead to dissimilar conclusions.

Secondly, it is suggested that the emerged networking-related abilities may be trained among managers and employees carrying out networking-related jobs, and that they may be taken into account when assigning managers and employees to networking-related jobs. However, no evidence was retrieved about effectiveness of such a training or job assignment practice.

Also, although the search strategy entailed very comprehensive keywords and queries, information about implementable networking strategies evaluated as less effective than the NCS solely comes from a REA specifically targeting networking-related research questions, while conducting REAs on each peculiar strategy might result in unedited insights. Additionally, the NCS is a self-report measure potentially threatening intervention validity (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002) due to people's propensity to overestimate themselves (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Graham, Collins, Donaldson, & Hansen, 1993; Schwartz, 1999; Stone et al., 2002).

Finally, generalisability of gathered results beyond small-sized firms and B2B services remains questionable.

Conclusions

This paper showed results from a state-of-the-art REA (Barends et al., 2017) about organisational networking in a small-sized HR consultancy academic spin-off. The aim was to provide small-sized university spin-offs' managers with the best available scientific knowledge about the worthiness of networking as a set of activities and behaviours to engage in, and, which organisational networking strategies would be better to adopt and implement.

Collected evidences can be used as a reference for practitioners as a reliable base to design organisational interventions for improving managers' and employees' networking capability, as well as for managers and employees who want to properly engage in networking behaviours.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that they have no competing interests in publishing this article.

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Appendix A

List of References of the Selected Papers

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