SIX PRINCIPLES FOR THE DESIGN OF BETTER NETWORKING EVENTS

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ABSTRACT

Networking events are seen as an essential activity for the establishment and maintenance of professional connections. Despite their ubiquity and perceived importance, networking events are often ineffective and unenjoyable. Suggestions for the improvement of networking outcomes typically focus on event selection or participant capabilities. In this article, we posit that greater success can be achieved by improving the design of networking events themselves. We adopt a research through design approach to derive the design features that explain the success of Wok+Wine, a networking event that consistently delivers positive functional and experiential outcomes across a range of cultural and organizational contexts. From a synthesis of these design features, we derive six generalizable design principles that can support managers in the creation of better networking events as well as the analysis and selection of existing ones.

KEYWORDS: Network; Networking events; Design research; Design principles

1. HUMAN CONNECTIONS IN ORGANIZATIONS: TIME FOR A RETHINK?

Connections to others are critical to the performance and general wellbeing of individuals in organizational settings. It is often through their connections to others that a person gains access to ideas (Burt, 2004), information and resources (Whittington et al., 2009) as well as opportunities for professional advancement (Uzzi, 2019). Next to these functional benefits, better-connected professionals are generally happier and more satisfied in the workplace (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004), in part due to their reduced likelihood of experiencing loneliness at work, a challenge that some describe as having reached epidemic levels (Murthy, 2017). By logical extension, organizations also benefit when their people are better-connected, as human connections play an important role in facilitating knowledge sharing (Hansen, 2002) as well as increasing productivity and innovation capability (Todo et al., 2016).

While connections to others are important as ever in organizations, the process of human connectivity is arguably becoming increasingly difficult. As organizations continue to adapt to ever-changing market conditions fuelled by a broad range of socioeconomic, technological, and political trends, workplaces have become increasingly diverse (Roberson, 2019). In addition, as traditional operational structures are supplemented by more agile and distributed ones, exemplified by the rise in project-based working and freelancing (Bentley et al., 2020), many workplace connections are becoming shorter-term, more intense and virtual. This combination means that people are increasingly working with dissimilar others, for shorter periods of time and without the opportunity to meet in person. Together, these factors make finding, forming, maintaining and leveraging professional connections all the more challenging and suggest the need for new approaches to support human connectivity in contemporary work situations.

Although the importance of human connectivity and the benefits derived from a person's professional connections are well established, prescriptive support of the human connectivity

process in professional contexts is lacking. What support there is tends either to stop at offering activity-level suggestions such as playing more golf (Gray et al., 2020), or it suggests specific tactics for improving a person's performance when engaging in networking such as "freshen your breath", "make eye contact", or "note the unusual" (Zack, 2019). While such advice offers guidance regarding the types of activities and behaviors that may improve networking outcomes, it places disproportionate responsibility for networking outcomes on the individual and does not adequately emphasize the role of contextual factors such as the design of the networking event.

In this article, we propose that more attention should be paid to the design of networking events themselves and suggest that much can be learned by adopting inductive design research methods to methodically derive the features and mechanisms that explain an event's success or deficiencies. To that end, we adopt a Research through Design (RtD) approach which involves the derivation of generalizable knowledge through the process of design (Stappers & Giaccardi, 2017). We analyze the design of Wok+Wine (W+W) (pronounced "wok-n-wine"), is a professional networking event launched in New York in 2010 and successfully deployed in over 150 instances across 11 countries between 2010 and 2018. W+W was repeatedly effective in delivering positive networking outcomes across a range of cultures and specific professional contexts. Through our analysis we derive the design features that explain W+W's success. These descriptive features are subsequently synthesized into a set of six prescriptive design principles that can support managers who organize events (guiding more effective design) as well as those who procure or attend the events of others (guiding the selection and analysis of existing events). Further support of each principle by extant literatures alludes to their generalizability beyond networking events, suggesting the principles may guide managers in improving interactivity and human connectivity outcomes in other organizational contexts.

2. OUR LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH NETWORKING

Networking is defined as "behaviors that are aimed at building, maintaining, and using informal relationships that possess the (potential) benefit of facilitating work-related activities of individuals by voluntarily granting access to resources and maximizing common advantages" (Wolff & Moser, 2009, pp. 196–197). Casciaro et al., (2014) distinguish between personal and professional networking and between spontaneous and instrumental networking. Personal networking refers to the development of connections in the context of a one's personal life and professional networking refers to those activities aimed at development of connections in the context of one's work. Unlike instrumental networking which is proactive and focused on the derivation of a particular benefit, spontaneous networking has no apparent purpose and may be initiated by someone else.

Professional networking often occurs in the context of networking events that take on many forms, from small, informal and unstructured social gatherings of colleagues (e.g., after-work drinks) to large scale highly structured experiences (e.g., networking dinners at business conferences). Regardless of their form, such events are generally associated with instrumental networking. Despite the ubiquity of networking events in all manner of organizational contexts and the general recognition of the important role such events play in helping people to achieve their networking objectives, many people are critical of such events. This can be explained in terms of both the negative psychological experience of participating in networking events (Casciaro et al., 2014) as well as their functional ineffectiveness (Coburn, 2016). Herein lies an important paradox. While business professionals recognize the importance of networking events as a potential means to achieving networking objectives, the experience of networking at such events is often negative. This sentiment is reflected in articles that offer suggestions for how to make networking at these events feel less "icky" (Gino, 2015) or even suggest avoiding them all together (Coburn, 2016).

2.1. The experience and effectiveness of professional networking events

The instrumental nature of many professional networking events normalizes the self-serving behavior of participants. This can result in a negative psychological experience, both for those initiating connections (Connectors) as well as those they are connecting to (Contacts). Connectors, for instance, judge their own instrumental behavior to be morally compromising (Casciaro et al., 2014). The negative experience of Contacts on the other hand is explained by their perception of such self-serving advances as being "creepy" (Mandeno & Baxter, 2020). In other words, self-serving advances are inauthentic and are perceived by the Contact as "You want something from me" rather than "You are genuinely interested in me".

The unsatisfactory effectiveness of networking events is explained in part by the suggestion that participants are all essentially "looking to achieve many of the same things" while at the same time "playing a different game" (Coburn, 2016). This implies that networking events create an atmosphere of "co-opetition" (Tsai, 2002) whereby participants are seeking to connect to each other cooperatively while simultaneously competing for a limited number of valuable connections. Due to the time constraints of most networking events, participants are required to determine as quickly as possible if another person may be valuable. If potential value is not immediately recognized, the instrumental nature of these events leads people to quickly move on to the next participant. In addition to detracting from the psychological experience of such events, as described above, this is problematic for two critical reasons. Firstly, given the increased diversity of many organization settings, it may be that potential value is not as easily recognizable because they it is in a form different from what a person is used to looking for. Secondly, accessing those resources may initially require establishing a basis of trust (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). In other words, the opportunities may indeed be there, it's just that people don't recognize them or don't give them time to surface.

Whether due to the negative psychological experience of networking events or their perceived lack of effectiveness, prior research has shown that many people don't engage as they know they should while others believe that certain types of events are not for them. In a study of business mixers, for example, Ingram and Morris (2007) found that although 95% of guests indicated their goal was to build new connections, people instead tended to speak to other people they already knew. Other work, exploring why women are less effective than men at building networks (e.g., Greguletz et al., 2018), suggests that women are both structurally excluded from some networking opportunities and hesitant to engage in traditional networking activities. This research supports a general narrative that disproportionately faults deficiencies in individuals, rather than a poor design of the actual event, for suboptimal networking outcomes.

2.2. Shifting our focus: from capabilities and categories to context

Explanations for poor networking outcomes tend to blame the individual (e.g., people are self-centred or hesitant). Similarly, suggestions for improving the outcomes of networking events mostly center on the individual (e.g., freshen your breath, ask better questions, look for commonalities), or the category of events (e.g., team lunch vs sporting activity). While acknowledging the role that participants and event type play in achieving positive networking outcomes, here we suggest it is the design of events themselves that often undermine networking potential. Instead of focusing on the selection of the most suitable event and the requisite capabilities of participants, organisations should take responsibility for creating more effective and enjoyable networking events.

3. DECONSTRUCTING AN EFFECTIVE NETWORKING CONCEPT

There are of course examples of events that do provide the right balance of positive psychological experience and functional effectiveness. One such example is W+W, a

networking event launched in New York in 2010 with the aim of facilitating connections within groups of unrelated professionals. Building on the success of W+W in improving human connectivity outcomes within such groups, the concept was also successfully applied to a number of specific organizational contexts where improving human connectivity was an important objective. Contexts included socializing distributed teams, bridging organizational silos, strengthening client relationships and general intra-organizational networking.

3.1. Research through design: generating knowledge from the act of doing

This work follows an analysis consistent with a research through design methodology. RtD provides a framework for the generation of new knowledge through the critical analysis and documentation of design activities that result in an improved end state (Stappers & Giaccardi, 2017). As such, this approach benefits from learning through a process of doing which contrasts to many other approaches. As this method sits between research and practice, the practical outcome is critical but so is a structured approach to conducting the work. Zimmerman et al., (2007) propose four requirements for effective use of research through design, namely: *process* – referring to the provision of sufficient detail that the process can be reproduced; *invention* – referring to the novelty of the solution in addressing a specific situation; *relevance* – referring to a clear articulation of why the desired end state is preferred; and *extensibility* – referring to the potential provided for building on resulting outcomes or applying the knowledge in new ways. The next sections describe these requirements in detail.

Process: the iterative development, testing and documentation of the solution

The first iteration of W+W occurred in New York in 2010 and was attended by 12 participants. Over a series of iterations, the concept was fine-tuned in New York into a consistently effective networking solution subsequently implemented in several other

American cities and in ten other countries. While adhering to the established design, each event was adapted to the local context, often providing unanticipated insights, thus aiding a continual learning and developmental process.

The development of the concept resulted from a combination of deliberate design decisions, unanticipated insights and contextual adaptations. Deliberate design decisions were guided by the primary objective of improving human connectivity outcomes for participants. While some decisions were informed by an understanding of participant needs, others were taken in response to what an analysis of existing events showed was not working. As the concept developed, it was tested in an increasingly broad range of organizational contexts aimed at addressing specific human connectivity challenges. The operational process was documented and communicated such that operators in various cities around the world (so called "ambassadors") could be trained to run events locally.

Invention: "An experiment in social chemistry"

Wok+Wine typically occurs in unique locations (e.g., bike shop, hair salon, or demolition site) with approximately 40 strangers, all standing around a long (15-18 ft) table covered in newspaper and banana leaves. Off to one side, the host cooks jumbo shrimp al-ajillo style in a large (24") wok. When ready, the host empties the contents of the wok along the length of the table. Everyone crowds around, rolling up their sleeves, peeling and eating the shrimp with their hands. Two more wok-loads of shrimp follow in an experience that lasts between 2-3 hours. McCracken (2013) describes W+W as "an experiment in social chemistry".

In addition to the contextual and culinary uniqueness of the experience described above, exemplified by the unusual venues, communal table and single menu item, this solution, designed for business professionals, is novel in many ways. There is generally no theme or agenda. There is no entertainment or other content (e.g., keynote speaker, band). There are no

chairs, cutlery or crockery. There is no seating plan, nor are there nametags. The main table is deliberately too short to accommodate all guests at the same time. The only other furniture in the room is a wine table, where there is only one type of wine. There are no waiting staff.

Relevance: improving the experience and outcomes of networking

W+W consistently delivers a positive psychological experience and is effective in terms of not just the number of connections people make but also the diversity of those connections. This is evident in the comments from participants. Comments such as "Everyone was so easy to speak to" and "I usually hate networking but that didn't feel like networking at all" speak to the way the event naturally helps participants to feel at ease and overcome the barriers that otherwise negatively affect the experience and outcomes of traditional networking events. This is equally apparent in the specific organizational contexts in which W+W was implemented including fostering inter-hierarchical connectivity between levels of a multinational bank. There the organizer noted "If we held a typical networking event, all of the senior people would just speak to other senior people and likewise with the more junior people. It was great to see people from different levels in the bank interacting so naturally".

Additional comments from participants allude to how certain features of the experience contributed to the positive outcomes. One participant noted "That was like a two-hour digital vacation. Everyone's hands were so messy no one was reaching for their phones". Someone else noted how messy hands contributed to a noticeable lack of business cards, another staple of typical professional networking events.

Extensibility: what others can learn

The deliberate and iterative nature of the W+W design process and the distinctive nature of the W+W solution enable analysis to understand those design features which led to the success of the event. Extensive deployment of W+W in various cultural and organizational

contexts alluded to a core set of generalizable principles that produced consistent results. To derive these principles, we first isolated the design features underpinning the event's success and compared these to variations seen in the culture and context of delivery of the event. This synthesis resulted in a decontextualized set of six generalizable design principles that can help guide the creation of other networking events. In addition, these principles help explain why some networking events are more effective than others and how events can be improved. The following sections elaborate on the features and principles from the analysis.

3.2. Critical design features that explain W+W's effectiveness

Our analysis of W+W highlights the critical design features that help to explain the robustness of the design and consistency of results across all settings. These design features are listed in

Table 1 and explained in detail thereafter.

[insert Table 1 about here]

Design feature 1: Discretionary focus

Unlike many networking events that are designed around a specific theme and intended only for professionals from a specific industry or sector, W+W events have no such pre-defined theme nor participant selection criteria. This design feature is grounded in the observation that when a singular reason is prescribed, it can limit who attends and what people believe they should talk about. Lacking a specific theme, no subject is off-limits. Participants adopt an exploratory mindset. This surfaces opportunities to connect that may otherwise be missed.

Design feature 2: Novel setting

W+W takes people out of their normal context and into novel settings (i.e., venues) in which events take place. Examples have included a construction site, a hair salon and a bicycle shop. This design feature provides two unique benefits. Firstly, lack of familiarity deprives participants of contextual cues that may encourage counterproductive normative behaviors. For example, when a venue is particularly formal, participants may act unnecessarily formally and seem less authentic. Secondly, unique venues help stimulate conversation due to their location, their design or the novel artefacts contained within the space.

Design feature 3: Choice limitation

Another unique feature of W+W relative to typical catered networking events is the lack of choice of food or beverage. All participants are eating and drinking the same thing (i.e., jumbo shrimp and one type of wine). This design feature was originally intended to simplify operations and reduce costs but had three powerful unintended consequences. Firstly, it removes unnecessary distractions and reduces participants' cognitive effort so participants can focus more of their attention on their primary objective of connecting with each other.

Secondly, it facilitates participants playing an active role in serving each other, and thus interacting. And finally, it eliminates hierarchical social cues (e.g., choice of food/beverage) that could lead to the unintentional formation of ingroups and outgroups.

Design feature 4: Inclusive activity

The fourth design feature relates to the central activity of W+W – peeling and eating jumbo shrimp with your hands from a communal table. As well as being messy, tactile and fun, a powerful unintended consequence of this hands-on activity is that it is totally inclusive, all but eliminating social and practical barriers to entry for participants. Unlike the "mandatory fun" activities found in many traditional networking events (e.g., group baking lessons, mural painting or sports), peeling and eating jumbo shrimp requires little skill. This prevents the unintentional introduction of hierarchies-of-skill which can serve to alienate participants who may hesitate to engage due to perceived lack activity-related skills or self-efficacy.

Design feature 5: Passive hosting

The primary objective of the host at W+W is to create optimum networking conditions rather than stimulating or brokering connections themselves. Similarly, the host at W+W does not seek to capture a disproportionate amount of participant attention. This is grounded in the idea that participants attend networking events to meet and learn from each other, not necessarily from the host. Additionally, this helps participants to assume ownership of the experience and its outcomes. Participant sentiment can be summarized as "this is *our* event" rather than "we are attending *your* event".

Design feature 6: Co-creation

Participants at W+W contribute to the creation of the experience. There are no serving staff. Participants are explicitly encouraged to refill their own wine glasses and to look around to see who else they can top-up. Explicitly granting participants permission to serve each other

provides an effective means of stimulating interaction that is less likely to result in rejection. Involved in the creation of the experience, participants become invested in its outcome.

Design feature 7: Unallocated territory

The only furniture present at a typical W+W event is a wine table and the central shrimp table. There are no chairs. Additionally, there is no silverware or tableware. As a result, participants are in no way allocated a specific territory for any part of the event. This liberates participants to continue to move during experience, naturally bumping into others as a result.

Design feature 8: Proximate experience

The final critical design feature relates to the physical aspects of the shrimp table that combine to create an atypically proximate experience. A single continuous table that is deliberately not quite long enough for all participants creates a central meeting place in which participants are standing unnaturally close to each other (i.e., literally rubbing shoulders). The result is a more physically intimate experience that enables conversation with many people and a lack of malice towards any. The optimal table form was determined through multiple iterations and experiments, often the result of space or material constraints.

4. SIX DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR IMPROVED HUMAN CONNECTIVITY OUTCOMES

Our final step was to synthesize these descriptive design *features* including variation in the culture and context of event delivery that explain the success of W+W into a set of generalizable design *principles*, decontextualized in order to support managers in the impactful creation and critical analysis of other networking events. Six design principles were derived in our synthesis. In this section, each principle is introduced along with its derivation from the aforementioned design features.

4.1. Contextual Ambiguity

Contextual ambiguity refers to the ambiguity experienced by participants when the normative and behavioral cues that would otherwise be provided by the context are disrupted or removed. This liberates participants, consciously or subconsciously, to question roles or behaviors that do not serve them in achieving authentic connections. Contextual ambiguity is driven primarily by two design features – discretionary focus (df1) and a novel setting (df2) – and is further reinforced through passive hosting (df5), co-creation (df6) and unallocated territory (df7).

When the organizers of professional networking events do not prescribe a specific topic or theme and the event is held in an unfamiliar setting, participants are liberated from conformist behavior and from limiting conversations to a prescribed set of topics. Additionally, when the roles participants would normally play are disrupted and all participants have equal access to each other, different types of interactions occur between them. Traditional patterns of behavior give way to unexpected socially or emotionally driven behaviors in which participants connect on their own terms, inspired by people and topics that interest them. Participants tend to adopt a more inquisitive mindset and an openness to start different kinds of conversations with people they would otherwise not typically have easy access to. Resulting conversations are personal and authentic.

Design Principle 1: Contextual Ambiguity: Increase the potential that participants adopt an open mind set by removing potentially misleading contextual cues. This will reduce the likelihood that aspects of the theme, the venue or other people unintentionally stimulate, encourage or otherwise support incongruous behaviors.

4.2. Experiential uniformity

Experiential uniformity refers to the sense of equality and inclusion felt by all participants when aspects of the event that might prioritize or advantage one individual or group over others are removed. This creates a level playing field where all participants feel equally included and able to participate and benefit from the available opportunities to connect. Experiential uniformity is driven by five design features: discretionary focus (df1), novel setting (df2), choice limitation (df3), inclusive activity (df4) and unallocated territory (df7).

When a singular reason for an event is not specified, the location is unfamiliar to participants, the group activity requires little skill, and participants are not allocated a specific space, it is difficult for any individual or group to have the upper hand. Together, these features contribute to creating a neutral basis for connection. Additionally, limiting choice reduces the likelihood of ingroup/outgroup divides forming on the basis of what people are seen to consume and the subsequent assumptions that are made on the basis of those choices.

Design Principle 2: Experiential uniformity: Increase the potential that everyone feels equal and included by ensuring all participants are given a uniform experience with minimal barriers to entry. This will reduce the likelihood that differences in familiarity, perceived ability or superiority lead to some participants feeling less welcome or able to participate.

4.3. Comfortable vulnerability

Comfortable vulnerability refers to the creation of an event in which all participants feel comfortable being vulnerable. This supports participants in presenting authentic versions of themselves which in turn facilitates trust building and results in more meaningful exchanges and connections. Comfortable vulnerability is driven by three design features: novel setting (df2), inclusive activity (df4) and proximate experience (df8).

When the normative behavior expected of participants (i.e., “This is who you should be”) is not obvious due to the novelty of the setting and the uniqueness of the shared experience, participants are more likely to revert to a more authentic version of themselves (i.e., “This is who I am”). Behaving authentically increases interpersonal affect and facilitates trust building. This is supported by the design of the physical experience that heightens participants’ sense of intimacy (i.e., a narrow, continuous table that is not long enough for all participants and therefore forces them closer together than they normally would).

Design Principle 3: Comfortable vulnerability: Increase the potential that deeper connections and exchanges occur by creating a safe space in which participants can comfortably and naturally be their true selves. This will reduce the likelihood of social comparison and will increase the overall level of trust between participants.

4.4. Structural simplicity

Structural simplicity refers to the simplification of an event’s design such that it only includes those features essential for the attainment of sought networking outcomes. This clarifies expectations of participants and reduces cognitive load while helping participants to focus on their primary objective of connecting with others. Structural simplicity is primarily driven by one design feature – choice limitation (df3) – and further reinforced by a combination of the inclusive activity (df4) and unallocated territory (df7).

When the number of choices available to participants is limited, cognitive load is reduced. Not only do participants have fewer decisions to make, they also need not consider the consequences of their choices, including what their choices may communicate to others. Psychological tension can increase when what participants want to do, conflicts with their perception of what they think they should do. Limiting choice minimizes the potential for such tension to arise.

Design Principle 4: Structural simplicity: Increase the potential that essential elements of the event have the intended effect by removing all elements that do not directly contribute to the desired outcome. This will reduce the ability of non-essential elements to dilute or interfere with the effect of essential elements.

4.5. Radical proximity

Radical proximity refers to deliberately increasing proximity between participants, in terms of both physical distance and frequency of interaction, beyond what would generally be deemed comfortable. This stimulates social collisions and heightens intimacy, thereby accelerating the trust-building process. Radical proximity is driven by two design features: unallocated territory (df7) and proximate experience (df8).

When participants of networking events are not allocated specific places (i.e., no seats or place settings) it frees them to move throughout the space for the duration of the event. Radically increasing the proximity of participants and ensuring flow throughout the space creates a more intimate experience and leads to more participants naturally bumping into each other. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of serendipitous encounters and results in more personal interactions. In addition, when participants are encouraged out of their comfort zones and into the personal spaces of others, a more intimate setting is created, and connections are more personal and authentic.

Design Principle 5: Radical proximity: Increase the potential for authentic serendipitous interactions to occur by arranging the space in such a way that participants naturally and more frequently come into close proximity of each other. This will reduce the onus on participants to actively approach others.

4.6. Actionable permissibility

Actionable permissibility refers to the explicit granting of permission, and thoughtful provision of tools, to support participants in connecting with others. This reinforces connecting to others as the primary objective of the event and provides participants with specific set of approaches for initiating connections. Actionable permissibility is driven primarily by two design features – passive hosting (df5) and co-creation (df6), and is further reinforced through the inclusive activity (df4)

When the host of a networking event adopts a passive role and participants are provided with specific ways to actively contribute to the creation of the experience (i.e., serving each other), the variety and number of potential opportunities to connect increases. The permission to serve others must be made explicit (e.g., hand-written labels around the necks of wine bottles with the text "Serve yourself… and someone else") and easy to act upon (i.e., wine is readily available on a table and there is only one type, so no need to ask others what they are drinking). The act of serving others (i.e., topping up their wine glass) naturally grants participants permission to interact. Advances by others are received as gestures of goodwill, so seldom result in rejection.

Design Principle 6: Actionable permissibility: Increase the potential that participants actively connect by providing explicit permission-granting cues and activities that are easy to act upon. This will reduce the likelihood that participants avoid connecting due to lack of confidence or fear of rejection.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

Because of the critical role that human connections play in the productivity and general wellbeing of people in the workplace, and their subsequent affect on organizational performance, this work has important implications for managers and organizations alike.

Specifically, the six principles presented in this article make an important contribution to our understanding of why some networking events are successful while others are not. Table 2 summarizes the principles and their implications for managers and organizations.

[insert Table 2 about here]

Networking events are commonly utilized in organizational contexts to facilitate finding, forming, maintaining and leveraging of professional connections. Given the general apprehension towards networking events and the increased challenges of connecting in the workplace due to trends such as team diversity and distribution, more needs to be done to support individuals in improving the outcomes of their networking efforts as well as the experience of networking. Rather than placing the burden of responsibility for improvement on individuals or simply suggesting people try different types of events, here we propose that greater success might be achieved by critically rethinking the design of networking events themselves, to improve their functional and experiential effectiveness.

In this article, we took a research through design approach to identify the design features that explain the effectiveness of W+W, a networking event shown to be consistently effective in helping professionals to enjoyably achieve their networking objectives. Although each design feature was positively framed to highlight its contribution to delivering sought outcomes, we recognize there may be circumstances where a feature's opposite is required. For example, "Unallocated territory" (design feature 7) makes less sense in situations when specific people are required to be placed in close proximity for certain types of collaboration.

Our derivation of the six design principles provides managers with a framework to support the design of new networking-type events and to explain the effectiveness of existing ones. The broad range of cultural and organizational contexts in which W+W was successfully implemented alludes to the generalizability of the principles, although further testing in non-

Western cultures would strengthen this proposition. Additionally, while W+W incorporated all six design principles, we expect that all six are not always required for improvements in human connectivity outcomes to be observed.

Support for each design principle by related literatures suggests generalizability of the principles beyond in-person networking events. Contextual ambiguity, which creates the space for people to come as they are instead of conforming to pre-determined roles, resonates with findings that positive networking outcomes result from encouraging authentic self-expression (Cable et al., 2013). Experiential uniformity, which ensures that all participants feel equal and included, is supported by prior research into the effects of social categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000). The effect of comfortable vulnerability is that participants experience a more authentic version of each other and is critical for the establishment of trust (Stephens et al., 2012). Structural simplicity, referring to the elimination of unnecessary aspects of an intervention's design, is a fundamental design principle (Rams, 1984) and resonates with prior research highlighting the cognitively paralyzing effects of too much choice (Schwartz, 2004). Radical proximity, which encourages participants comfortably into each other's personal spaces reflects prior work that recognizes proximity as a reliable predictor of human connectivity (Allen, 2007). And finally, actionable permissibility, which explicitly permits participants to interact and provides them with the means to do so, resonates with prior research into affordances of informal interaction (Fayard & Weeks, 2007).

While much can be learned from prior research and the aforementioned studies provide theoretical support for our six design principles, it is the principles' contextualized derivation through a methodical inductive (RtD) process that provides confidence as to their validity. Future work might explore the extent to which the principles can successfully guide the design of other organizational activities and settings where effective interpersonal interaction plays a critical role, from meetings and workshops to workplaces.

6. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While humans may be social creatures, it is a mistake to think that all people will naturally and automatically network with each other, especially in professional contexts. The overwhelming evidence for the performance and well-being related benefits of being better connected professionally is countered by research that highlights the numerous practical and psychological barriers that can impede the connectivity process. Rather than compelling individuals to address such barriers in order to improve their networking ability and outcomes, organizations can play a vital role by designing better networking experiences. Our actionable design principles, derived from real-world business contexts, can help managers and practitioners to design activities and settings that help people to meet their professional networking objectives while enjoying themselves in the process.

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Table 1: Critical design features of Wok+Wine

Design Feature	**Explanation / Example**	**Outcomes**
Discretionary focus	No prescribed theme or topic for the event nor singular measure of success.	Nothing is off-topic. Encourages exploratory mindset. Unexpected opportunities to connect.
Novel setting	Unexpected event venue, atypical for the type of gathering. E.g., Hair salon, abandoned building, bicycle shop.	Minimizes misleading contextual cues. Stimulates conversation.
Choice limitation	Reducing options available to participants. E.g., One type of food and one type of wine.	Limits distractions. Reduces cognitive effort. Encourages co-creation. Removes social hierarchical cues.
Inclusive activity	Peeling and eating jumbo shrimp with hands.	Reduces barrier to entry. Encourages participation. Stimulates conversation. Reduces hierarchy.
Passive hosting	Host not overly present or actively brokering interpersonal connections.	Minimizes distractions. Prevents celebrification of host. Increases sense of collective ownership of outcome.
Co-creation	No serving/waiting staff. Participants actively encouraged to contribute.	Encourages participation. Facilitates interaction.
Unallocated territory	No chairs, tableware, silverware.	Prevents stagnation. Democratizes access. Reduces hierarchy.
Proximate experience	A single, central table that deliberately encourages people close together.	Reduces hierarchy. Increases intimacy. Stimulates interaction.

Table 2: Six design principles and their implications for managers and organizations

Design Principle and description	**Grounding insight**	**Management implications for networking events**	**Broader organizational implications**
Contextual ambiguity Eliminating or mitigating potentially misleading behavioral cues.	Contextual aspects of a setting can encourage normative behavior that is incongruous with the attainment of desired objectives.	Identify and remove or mitigate the effects of misleading behavioral cues communicated by, for example, venue choice or messaging style.	Consider how the selection and design of spaces (physical and virtual), prompts and activities can unintentionally communicate misleading behavioral cues, to increase the likelihood of desired behaviors.
Experiential uniformity Ensuring an equal and inclusive experience for all participants.	Both the context and content of an experience can unintentionally make some people feel more or less equal, included and able to participate.	Be alert to elements of an experience that might prescribe and prioritize an archetypal participant, thus alienating or negatively differentiating others.	Consider how elements of settings and activities can unintentionally differentiate people in organizational contexts, to prevent ingroups/outgroups forming and to ensure everyone feels equal, welcome, and included.
Comfortable vulnerability Creating a safe space in which participants can be their true selves.	When people do not feel comfortable and able to be themselves, they are less likely to fully engage.	Create psychologically safe experiences, where participants are supported in showing up as who they are rather than who they think they should be.	Consider how elements of settings can reduce peoples' perceived sense of psychological safety, to encourage openness, honesty and participation from all.
Structural simplicity Removing non-essential elements of an experience.	The inclusion of non-essential elements in an experience can serve to dilute or contaminate the effect of essential elements.	Ensure that all elements included in an experience can be justified in terms of their positive contribution to the attainment of clearly defined objectives.	Consider how each element of an organizational setting or activity can be justified in terms of its contribution to sought objectives, to determine which elements are essential and which can be eliminated.
Radical proximity Increasing proximity between participants beyond typical comfort levels.	The closer people are able to comfortably be brought together, the more likely they are to connect.	Seek to eliminate both physical and psychological barriers such that participants are naturally encouraged to be closer together.	Consider how the layout of spaces and positioning of people within the organization can naturally heighten proximity, to encourage interaction and connectivity.
Actionable permissibility Providing cues that guide interaction, granting participants permission to connect.	People often feel they need permission to connect to others. Permission granting is most successful when it is easy to act upon.	Provide unambiguous prompts and props that grant people permission to connect to each other and that guide interaction in order to facilitate connection.	Consider how simple, intuitive and actionable permission granting prompts and props can guide interaction, to stimulate and facilitate connectivity across the organization.

RESPONSE TO REVIEWER 1

Q	Reviewer 1 Comments	Response
Notes	Note: I do see a timing related challenge with publishing this paper, the design principles for better networking events do appear applicable only to in-person events. As such, those are not currently being hosted. For example, the principle 'Radical proximity' (described for by statements such as "Radically increasing the proximity of participants and ensuring flow throughout the space creates a more intimate experience and leads to more participants naturally bumping into each other.) in particular makes me consider the timing of when to publish this paper, and I think it would make more sense to publish it when the world is preparing to 'go back' to a safe in person approach rather than when this is not possible.	Thank you for this timely reflection. We agree that the pandemic places the work in an interesting light and we have considered the timing. The socialising occurring in China, Australia, New Zealand and, increasingly, the US and Europe (among others) suggests that there is renewed traction towards in-person meetings and this will hopefully increase with vaccine roll-out. Regardless, in line with comments from Reviewer 2, we expect the principles to be generalizable to other contexts – both offline (in person) and online. In our own work with organisations, for instance, we have seen examples of radical proximity created within digital meeting spaces such as GatherTown (https://gather.town) and Wonder (https://www.wonder.me) which go some way toward enhancing the sense of proximity experienced by participants, albeit virtually. While it is difficult to achieve the same degree of intimacy in online settings, the heightened proximity offered by these services do facilitate effective social collisions. The principles may help improve the design of these virtual environments. Again, however, as the world begins to open up again, we anticipate a heightened desire to rebuild existing connections and establish new ones. Thus, by the time this article goes to publication we feel that the timing will be appropriate.
1	This is an interesting paper that sets the foundation with a problem description relating to networking events and suggests that success can be achieved by improving the design of such networking events. 1a) It leaves me wondering what type of manager this is written for? Only managers who organize events, or others too (e.g., as a guide to what events to consider attending)?	Thank you for these comments and provocations. These have been addressed in the amended manuscript, summarized below. 1a) Regarding the type of manager who this is for, we suggest that this work is relevant for both manager-organizers as well as manager-attendees of events. Furthermore, this work has implications for managers who procure the services of others. Often external service providers are brought in to deliver networking event concepts. We believe this work provides such managers with support to critically analyze these services. As

	1b) Also, it appears to apply only to in-person networking events, would the principles be applicable to other types? (See my note on timing of paper above too). 1c) Further, the paper gives examples of individuals who may find networking more difficult (and make the point to not blame the individual, which I think is well placed in the paper), however it is not clear if/what boundaries there are to who the intended participants are. Is this applicable across industries, across different types of perceived barriers (e.g., diversity/inclusion considerations), are there other cultural considerations and as such would this set of design principles work only in certain types of countries?	mentioned above, and as you rightly point out, the principles may be used by attendees of events to explain their effectiveness. We have made this explicit at the end of Section 1. 1b) As mentioned above, while we the principles were derived from an in-person context, we believe they may be generalizable to other contexts – both in-person and online. This is partially due to the fact that many digital events adopt the underlying factors which guide this work including spatial environments at times (e.g. GatherTown and Wonder). We have addressed this point in section 5 (Discussion and Implications for Managers) when commenting on generalisability. This is also summarized in Table 2 which we added as a replacement for Figure 1 (see below). 1c) Regarding participant relevance, the event (W+W) was successfully implemented in several countries with many organisations and with various types of participants. As such, we are confident it is widely acceptable though specific boundaries are useful to consider for future studies. We have discussed generalisability in section 5 - 'Discussion and Implications for Managers'. The comment about applicability to other countries is well made. While the intervention was tested successfully in 11 countries and thus gives us confidence regarding its effectiveness in diverse contexts, the countries have mainly been 'western' and broader generalisability should be considered. This is also addressed in section 5 – 'Discussion and Implications for Managers'.
2	It provides eight design features that explain W+W's effectiveness and six design principles to increase the success of networking events. I suggest replacing figure 1 with a model that visually outlines the design principles and any potential sequencing or hierarchy in the associated decision making.	Thank you for this helpful suggestion. We agree that more value will be added by outlining how the design principles may aid decision making and the broader implications for managers. We have taken your suggestion and replaced Figure 1 with a new table (Table 2) that highlights the implications for manager as they relate to networking contexts as well as the broader implications for other organizational settings.

		While sequencing or exploring hierarchical relations between the principles is a fascinating idea, we do not see such a relationship between the principles. Equally, we are not suggesting that all principles be required for success. This is also now mentioned in section 5 – 'Discussion and Implications for Managers'.
3	Yes.	
4	A couple of observations relating to this question. 4a) First, in the table 'Table 1: Critical design features' the outcomes all seem positive, what are the limitations or challenges of the design features? 4b) Second, Figure 1 'Translation of descriptive design features into prescriptive design principles' is very confusing to follow and it is not clear what extra value the figure brings – what is it intended to communicate?	4a) Yes, this is an astute observation. We deliberately sought to frame each design feature in terms of the value it created in the context of the event. There will of course be situations where one or more design features may be undesirable, or potentially even detrimental. For example, there are cases where a very specific type of setting is required in order to set the scene for a specific type of event. We have added text to clarify this in section 5 – 'Discussion and Implications for Managers'. 4b) As per your earlier suggestion, we have replaced Figure 1 with a more useful table (Table 2) that summarizes the implications of the principles for managers and organizations.
5	Yes, however I think the critical question remains "what type of manager" and when that is clarified it would become clearer how to apply the principles.	Consistent with the response 1a, detail has been added to section 1 of the paper to explain.
6	n/a – note however: The paper describes the research approach including stating "To that end, we adopt a Research through Design (RtD) approach which involves deriving and articulating generalizable knowledge through the process of designing an intervention (Stappers & Giaccardi, 2017). The intervention, Wok+Wine (W+W) (pronounced "wok-n-wine"), is a professional networking event launched in New York in 2010 and successfully deployed in over 150 instances across 11 countries between 2010 and 2018 before activities were	Thank you for this comment. We agree that the use of the term "intervention" is unnecessarily misleading as we were indeed not intervening. We have altered the wording of this paragraph in section 1 and trust that this is now clarified.

	suspended due to Covid-19. W+W was repeatedly effective in delivering positive networking outcomes across a range of cultures and specific professional contexts." With this it is not entirely clear what is being intervened as the description suggests (networking events in general?) – this could be further clarified or simply re-written.	
7	This paper is well-written and overall enjoyable to read. I look forward to seeing how it develops.	Thank you for this comment and the useful suggestions.

RESPONSE TO REVIEWER 2

Q	Reviewer 2 Comments	Response
	Thank you for the opportunity to review the article 'Six Principles for the Design of Better Networking Events' submitted to Business Horizons. The article presents suggestions for the improvement of networking outcomes by examining the success of a networking event, Wok+Wine. There is no doubt that this is an interesting paper which addresses an explicit business problem of enhancing the success of networking. As I read the design principles, I wonder to what extent these findings could stretch further beyond your context into, for instance, the design of workplaces and spaces. I believe that you could extend your conclusions and implications to better guide design outside pure networking.	Thank you for this provocation. We agree that the derived design principles may indeed have implications for a broader range of contexts such as those you mentioned. We have taken your comment onboard in two areas of the paper. Firstly, following a strong suggestion from Reviewer 1, we removed Figure 1 and replaced it with a new table (Table 2) that makes much clearer the implications for managers as well as the broader organizational implications. Secondly, we have addressed the point of generalizability more explicitly in section 5 – Discussion and Implications for Managers.
	The paper provides a clear roadmap for addressing the business problem, and Table 1 and Figure 1 are very useful in drawing together your ideas and conclusions. Could Table 1 extend to also draw out elements for planning/ implementing design features outside the context of W+W?	This comment seems to build on the comment above and is a good provocation to suggest what the implications for managers might be beyond the context of networking. On reflection, as described above, we have replaced Figure 1 with a table (Table 2) that makes the implications for managers much clearer and that also alludes to the broader

	I was also wanting to see how the design features could be extended to new contexts, i.e., design feature 4 states "This prevents the unintentional introduction of hierarchies-of-skill which can serve to alienate participants who may hesitate to engage due to perceived lack activity-related skills or self-efficacy." I would like to see each of these summary points extrapolated to guide design in new contexts. However, the design principles provide some extension of this – perhaps a solution is to develop a Table for the design principles with steps/ actions for managers to implement these principles in new contexts?	applicability of the principles in other contexts. We deliberately refrained from further expanding on the design features as our goal was the derivation of the design principles. Because the design principles are abstracted one level further than the design features, we can expect them to be more generalizable and therefore, more useful to a broader range of managers and organizational contexts.
	The paper well-constructed and the arguments flow well and in a way that makes sense. Clear and practical managerial recommendations are provided but could be enhanced with the addition of a second table expanding on the design principles – these are what I see as most value to managers in applying these ideas to networking and beyond.	Thank you. Please see previous comment regarding the addition of a second table (Table 2).
	I think there could be more consideration of human connectivity in the modern – post-Covid era – i.e., how will human connectedness likely change and how might examples you draw on (communal dining) be applicable in this new normal.	Yes, we too considered the timeliness of this article given the current state (or lack) of in-person events. We agree that the pandemic places the work in an interesting light and we have considered the timing. The socialising occurring in China, Australia, New Zealand and, increasingly, the US and Europe (among others) suggests that there is renewed traction towards in-person meetings and this will hopefully increase with vaccine roll-out. That said, building on previous comments, we believe the practical implications of the principles extend beyond purely in-person networking events. In the revised manuscript, we make mention of this in section 5 – Discussion and Implications for Managers
	A minor note, on p.21 there is note of six generalisable design features and then immediately eight design	We have removed the word "eight" when discussing principles as, on reflection, the

	features are outlines. At first I thought this was a mistake bit then noted there are two sections – 6 and 8 principles – maybe there needs some clarity to guide the ready around p.21 re this structure.	number of features is not relevant and we agree it adds to confusion.