Visual Power Networking

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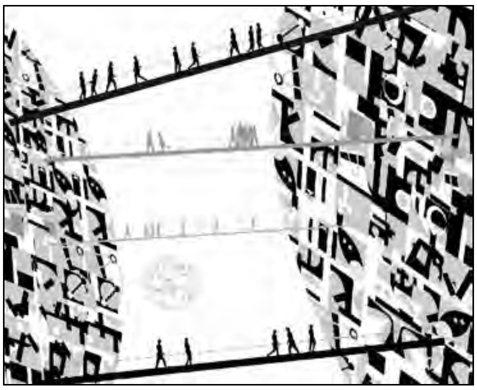

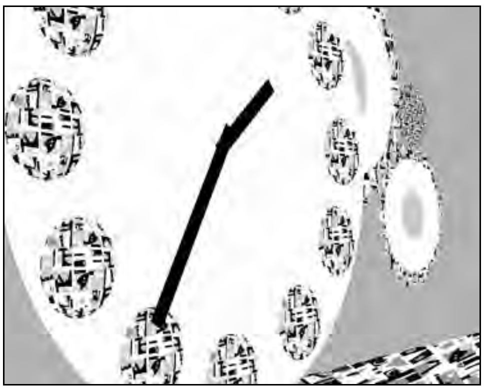

Keywords:
Networking, Information Visualisation, Facilitation of Meetings and Workshops, Disruptive Moderation and Facilitation, Overcoming Communication Problems

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Snapshot (Quick Learning)

Visual Power Networking is a facilitation technique best suited for the early phases of a conference, when delegates should get to know each other and initial contacts should be made amongst delegates.

Visual Power Networking requires typically just under an hour of time and guarantees that every delegate would meet at least three other delegates with similar or complementary interests and expertise.

Visual Power Networking creates a buzz amongst the audience. It leaves delegates in an energetic and open state of mind. They are positively activated, easily interested in new topics and they engage readily in some hands-on activities.

Visual Power Networking establishes connections between delegates that can be further built upon in break out groups and other small-group activity during the conference.

Finally, Visual Power Networking creates links between delegates that have the potential to last longer than the conference itself, because they are not randomly generated but purposefully created based on the understanding of every single delegate's interests and needs.

Keywords: networking, information visualisation, facilitation of meetings and workshops, disruptive moderation and facilitation, overcoming communication problems

Context (Where & What)

At the beginning of conferences, workshops, meetings, etc. quite often people from different contexts gather and are supposed to work and network together for a few days. However, most conference organisers don't address this purpose specifically, but leave it to the delegates to get to know each other. Hatcher, Wiessner, Storberg and Chapman (2006) argue that conferences are typically organized to share and report information, but rarely purposively designed to generate new learning. Particularly if it is not 'normal', accepted behaviour to talk to new people delegates remain stuck in their own circles; thus the potential of meeting new people is not put to good use.

The Visual Power Networking is designed for all these environments as where people who don't know each other have to be stimulated to talk to each other, but where there is very limited time available and people tend to be shy.

A Visual Power Networking session can take anything between 30 and 90 minutes, with an optimum duration of just under an hour for a conference size of up to 100 delegates. The method does not scale particularly well to accommodate for lager audiences.

Through Visual Power Networking delegates get to know each other, they know who is in the room and they get a picture of the different topics that are there to talk about.

Visual Power Networking works well as an icebreaker; it creates an atmosphere of interest in other delegates and it stimulates the sharing of knowledge and experience.

Visual Power Networking is a method that does not focus on gurus or experts. Delegates are less likely to establish themselves as dominant in front of the plenary in an early stage of a conference since everybody gets the chance to talk to everybody else on a basis of equality.

Particularly for smaller groups Visual Power Networking produces a visual diagram of potential connections between delegates. This diagram can stay visible during the whole conference so delegates or facilitators can easily refer back to it.

Preparation (The Checklist)

In preparation of a Visual Power Networking session it is advisable to collect delegates' profiles beforehand. Typically such a profile would include names, affiliation, fields of expertise or experience of the delegates and an indication which topics they are interested in or what expertise they are looking for. Ideally a recent photograph of the delegate can be added to the profile. This information can easily be collected when delegates register for the conference. This is particularly easy when delegates register online.

For the actual Visual Power Networking Session two sets of these profiles need to be available in printed format on individual A4 sheets. One set of profiles is handed back to the delegates, e.g. at check-in, with the instruction to have it ready for the Visual Power Networking session.

A second set is put up in the room where the session will take place. Since several people will be trying to read these profile sheets simultaneously it is a good idea not to cram them into a too confined space but to be able to leave some space between individual sheets when put up on a wall next to each other. Ideally, the walls can be covered with an extra layer of wallpaper before putting up profiles so participants are able to write down notes or messages directly on the wall next to the profiles.

Optionally, a third set could be handy as a backup if delegates appear at the session without their printed profile. Alternatively an easy way to print out profiles could be provided since profile sheets have a tendency to go AWOL.

An interesting variation would be to include the profile information on the delegates' badges. Another variation would be to hang two sets of profiles on the walls and have delegates find their own profiles at the beginning of the session. Additional time would have to be allowed in this case.

Toolkit (The Essentials)

For the Visual Power Networking session, an open plan space is required. The space should provide enough pin boards or plain walls where profile sheets can be put up. Chairs and tables should be removed from the room.

Delegates will need pens to make notes and to write down delegates' names, also on the sheets that are put up on the walls. Therefore ball pens are not best suited, so it is best to have pencils available. Ideally this would have been considered when putting together the delegates pack.

Every delegate gets three pieces of post-it notes, either pre-printed with their name and affiliation, or blank ones on which they would write their names and affiliation.

Additionally a large (2 x 2 meters) sheet of paper is needed for the visualisation of the network.

Making it Happen (The Approach & the Action)

In preparation

1. Delegates have to fill in their profile before the conference: Name, organisation, topic interests and fields of expertise or experience, and expertise they are seeking for.
2. Facilitators write delegates' names on the large sheet of paper, e.g. in a circle. This sheet of paper will later be used for the visualisation of the connections between participants.
3. Facilitators put up delegates' profiles on the pin boards or on the walls of the room where the session takes place.

Visual Power Networking Session

For the Visual Power Networking Session, delegates gather in the room where the session will take place. The profiles are already hanging on the walls, and there is no seating available. A small stage, chair or ladder is provided for the lead facilitator to be clearly visible in the crowd. Before the session begins, the facilitators have to make sure that all delegates have their own profiles, pens and Post-its ready.

If people have to find their own profiles on the walls and take one copy while leaving the second on the wall, they now can be instructed to do so. Note that this can consume a considerable amount of time. Also if additional profiles have to be handed out or printed, the impact on the schedule might be considerable. Delegates who already have their own profiles ready will easily be able to spend their time reading other peoples profiles.

The session proper

Step	Duration	Activity
Introduction	5 min	The facilitators present themselves to the audience. The lead facilitator briefly explains the purpose of the session and outlines the 3 steps of the session: 1. Exchange: Get to know each other in pairs. 2. Marketplace: Search 3 potential contacts for partner. 3. Greeting: Find and meet the 3 potential contacts, 'add a face to the name'.  Now the facilitators launch the 'Exchange' phase by encouraging

Step	Duration	Activity
		people to get into pairs with somebody standing next to them who they don't already know. Facilitators have to be a bit pushy in this phase.
Exchange	5 min	Delegates get together in pairs and have 5 minutes (in total) to explain their own profiles to their partner. In the case of an uneven number of delegates, either one group of three can be formed. Everybody tries to understand, what their partner is interested in and what contacts they would be looking forward to making at this conference. At the end of this phase, delegates exchange their profile sheets and the three post-its with their names and affiliation, i.e. everybody should now have the profile sheet of their partner and the post-its with the names of their partners in their hands. Then the facilitator launches the 'Marketplace' phase.
Marketplace	15 min	Everybody searches through the profiles on the walls to find potential contacts for their partner. A potential contact could either be someone who shares the same interests and expertise as their partner or it could be somebody who has the specific knowledge, experience or expertise their partner is looking for at this conference. Once they have found a suitable profile, they note down the name of this delegate on the profile sheet of their partner. Also, they stick one of the post-its on the profile sheet of the potential contact on the wall. They might also want to make a note of the reason for selecting this contact.  Then they go on to search for the next potential contact, then for the third. Once they have completed the search they return to their partner and hand back the profile sheet. Equally they get their profile sheet back. After 10 minutes, the facilitators give an indication of the time passed and that there are only 5 minutes left to accomplish the task. Then the facilitator launches the 'Greeting' phase.

Step	Duration	Activity
Greeting	15 to 20 min	 Delegates start searching the crow for their potential contacts, meet and greet them, establish that they indeed share common interests and express the wish to meet again during the conference. In the meantime, facilitators start to draw the Visual Network. For each connection suggested by the delegates (and as indicated by the post-its on the profiles on the wall) they draw a line connecting the two names on the large sheet of paper. Since time will probably not be sufficient, this is only the start of the Visual Network, and the facilitators or support staff should complete the picture after the end of the session.  Alternatively the network could be captured electronically in a spreadsheet or drawn by the partner who suggested the connections. After 10 and 15 minutes the facilitators give an indication of the time passed.
End	5 min	The facilitators show the (beginning of) the Visual Network to all delegates (and if appropriate explain that the drawing will be finished later on), or they refer to the electronically captured network.  The facilitators once more stress the purpose of the session and highlight how many interesting and content-rich connections have been made in a comparatively short amount of time and that everybody has met at least four people who were new to them, who would share their interests or who would have that particular expertise the delegates have been looking for. The connections established are not randomly generated but purposefully created based on the understanding of every single delegate's interests and needs, thanks to the collective power of the audience.

Afterwards

The resulting Visual Network, if drawn up properly, can remain in the meeting space or anywhere else for delegates to remind them of the session. Also the profiles can be used further as some kind of a message board. On occasions delegates have found it appropriate to stick their business cards on the profile sheets of delegates they would have liked to meet or to scribble small messages to other delegates. If that is the intention, the facilitators should mention that explicitly so delegates actually do check back with their profiles to find out if there is a message waiting for them.

Results & Next Steps (The Follow-Up)

The immediate result and main benefit of a Visual Power Networking session is that it generates a real buzz among delegates, it does energize them, and it creates an atmosphere where people do want to do something together.

This is particularly important to notice for conference organisers and has to be taken into account accordingly when scheduling a Visual Power Networking session: The session immediately following Visual Power Networking can benefit from that thriving energy in the audience – or destroy it completely. Hence you would want that next session to require a positively activated audience that easily is interested in the topic and readily engages in some hands-on activities.

Far more difficult, it seems, is to keep the connections between delegates alive. Ideally the conference schedule would allow coming back to these connections at several points over the course of the event. For example small-group activities could be held in break out groups that reflect similar interests as identified in the Visual Power Networking session. Lunches or receptions are other opportunities where delegates can take up the Visual Power Networking contacts again.

After the conference electronic contact details could be sent out to delegates to remind them of their connections, ideally combined with the respective delegates' profiles. However, eventually it is the delegates' own responsibility to keep these contacts alive.

Real Cases (As it has Happened)

Contactivity

The **Contactivity Conference 2006 in London Greenwich** was a very practical two day gathering of 64 Knowledge Management (KM) practitioners, academics and consultants, modelled within a Community of Practice (CoP) framework across both the virtual and physical worlds (Mitchell, 2006). The aim was to familiarize participants with a number of different knowledge sharing methods, Visual Power Networking being one of about five methods. Participants came from all over Europe; most of them didn't know each other. However, there was a core group of the KB community that did know each other very well. In order to make people talk to each other beyond existing contacts, the organisers decided to have a Visual Power Networking session in the morning of the first day.

Before the conference, participants registered on a wiki and filled in their profiles online. These profiles were printed out by the conference organisers (two copies) and brought to the conference. For participants who did not fill in their profile online beforehand, empty templates were available. The facilitators prepared the room and started the session as described above.

The process went very well and participants' feedback was excellent. They especially liked that they were forced to check the profiles of everybody in order to find interesting people for their partners and that the session stimulated a lot of communication with people they didn't know beforehand. People e.g. said 'I had many useful conversations and some would not have happened without the event design' and 'got to see connections with people I wouldn't have thought of otherwise.' One third of the participants voted the Visual Power Networking as 'the best bit' of the Contactivity event. Asked what methods participants would want to use themselves Visual Power Networking ranked second (after Open Space).

However, one of the participants tried to abuse the networking exercise as marketing opportunity; instead of searching contacts for his partner, he was putting his own business cards next to the profile of people he was interested to meet. While one might think that this could be an interesting extension to the Visual Power Networking exercise, participants did not respond at all to his advances. Therefore we would suggest that such behaviour would best be actively discouraged.

After the conference, participants were sent the list of connections they had made (presented in an excel sheet).

Masters Course on Knowledge Management

The **masters course on Knowledge Management at ETH Zurich,** provided by the research group 'Psychology of Work in Organisation and Society' at the Center for Enterprise Sciences, is an integral part of the studies for the master of advanced studies in management, technology, and economics (MAS MTEC). In June 2006, 32 Students participated in this course.

Apart from providing participants with an overview on Knowledge Management theory, the objective of the course was to teach participants several methods for knowledge sharing and to let them try out these methods (learning by experiencing). A third objective was to create an atmosphere of trust among the participants who mostly did not know each other as most of them did not follow the same courses since they were coming from different industrial backgrounds. In its second part of the course, the participants were to simulate a Community of Practice and to exchange quite sensitive information on how their companies practiced the sharing of knowledge. To be able to do this, students had to explicitly know the background of everybody in the room in order to feel safe.

Thus, a variation of the above-described Visual Power Networking was introduced. At the beginning, everybody had to talk to everybody for two minutes and exchange information on professional background and hobbies. This was done in two groups. The students took notes about the person they were talking to. After having talked to everybody, the students had to indicate which of the other students would be most interesting for them to exchange experiences with. To do this a large sheet of paper had been prepared beforehand which had the names of all students written on it along the edges. The students then had to draw lines between their own name and the name of their most interesting partners. This visual network remained visible for everybody during the whole rest of the course and was re-used for group building and the CoP simulation exercise.

At the end of the course, students had to review all the methods that had been presented. Particularly the feedback on Visual Power Networking was very positive. One student told the story how he some weeks later he was participating in a team project with several other students whom he did not know, except one from the KM course. In this team, he said, cooperation with the one student he knew from the KM course was much better that with the others. He explicitly concluded that this was due to the Visual Power Networking exercise where he got a broad overview on the experiences and background of the other student.

UnBla 2007

At the first UnBla event on regional innovation held in Luzern, Switzerland, a variation of the method was used. Noting that the audience constituted “locals” (Swiss), and “travellers” (delegates from abroad), the idea was to introduce locals to travellers, and what better way to do so than by sharing gifts. Before the event itself, each delegate was asked to bring a gift from their homeland, to put their business card or a name tag in the gift, and to then gift wrap it.

At the event, the gifts from the “locals” were put on one table, and those from the “travellers” on another table. Delegates were then asked to pick-up a random gift from the table other than where their gift was placed. After opening the gift, their task was to find the person who had provided the gift, to thank them, learn about their background, and identify their main interest areas related to regional innovation. Each person thus, met at least two persons: one whose provided gift they took, and one to who took the gift they had provided.

After meeting their new colleagues and learning about their background, interests, and needs, participants participated in creating a visual network connecting different people with each other based on background, interests, and needs.

Gifts: The Trigger for Networking

Rush: What will I get and who will I thank?

Thanks: Thanking & learning about each other

Connections: The people to meet ☺

This variation of the method proved to be quite fun and beneficial to participants, as not only did they meet people and share interests, but also got a gift each to remember.

Tips & Tricks (To-Do)

- ☑ Do give delegates the opportunity to prepare their profile beforehand, and provide some examples of good and useful profiles. Maybe think even of giving a bad profile as an example of how not to fill in a profile.
- ☑ During the session, give clear instructions to the audience what exactly to do in each step. It might be helpful to demonstrate what delegates are required to do.
- ☑ Don’t worry, if the 20 minutes of the ‘Greeting’ phase are not sufficient to finish the Visual Network diagram. This can be done during the next session by a facilitator or support staff.
- ☑ Do make good use of the potential connections created during the Visual Power Networking session, e.g. when splitting up the audience for break-out sessions.
- ☑ Do make good use of the profiles on the walls, be it as message board or for delegates to give feedback or make announcements.

Potholes (Not-to-Do)

- ☒ Don’t let the experts (or worse: the self-elected gurus) dominate the networking session, e.g. by abusing their profile for personal marketing, or by adding their business card to the profiles during the Visual Power Networking session. There is plenty of opportunity to do that afterwards.
- ☒ Don’t force delegates into selecting topics or areas of interest from a pre-defined list only. This limits the expressive power of profiles.
- ☒ Don’t rely only on capturing the network electronically. The physical and omnipresent manifestation of the many connections created during the Visual Power Networking session is the best way to remind delegates of the value of this particular exercise.

Acknowledgements

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Author Biographies

Dr. **Peter Troxler** works as a management consultant in Europe. He supports organisations in the private and public sector building management systems for the knowledge economy. Peter has worked in academia at ETH Zurich, Switzerland and at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. His main interests are cross-disciplinary issues at the interface of psychology, IT and engineering, and management science. He is said to be a passionate facilitator, and he has a second life as an arts producer and manager.

Dr. **Patricia Wolf** works as lecturer, researcher and consultant at the Lucerne Business School in Switzerland. In the meantime, she writes her habilitation on individual orientations in collaborative intercultural actions at the ETH Zurich, Switzerland. Prior to this, Patricia worked for three years as Researcher and Consultant at the Institute of Human Factors and Technology Management at the University of Stuttgart, Germany, on consulting and research projects in the areas of Knowledge Management and Innovation Management. Patricia obtained her PhD in Business Administration at the University of Witten-Herdecke, Germany. Topic of her doctor thesis was 'Success Measurement of Communities of Practice'.

Dr. Abdul Samad (Sami) Kazi is a Chief Research Scientist at VTT – Technical Research Centre of Finland. His research experience spans more than twenty large scale international industry-driven research projects. Dr. Kazi's expertise and interest areas include inter-enterprise collaboration, knowledge and innovation management, disruptive facilitation, and mobile applications. He has been the lead editor of eight books in the subject areas of knowledge management, construction IT, systemic innovation, and open building manufacturing.