Networking: A Successful Linkage for Community Occupational Therapists

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The networking process involves the linkage of people, agencies, and community resources. This paper describes an application of networking and community involvement. The four authors, all occupational therapists, used their knowledge and skills to provide and extend health promotion services for disabled persons within their community. During this process, they extended the role of occupational therapy into nontraditional settings.

Networking: A Supportive Trend

The provision of health care services has been reshaped by certain social forces, such as (a) the shift of health care resources from a disease orientation to an emphasis on wellness, (b) the change in health care provision from hospital settings to neighborhood centers and ambulatory care settings, (c) the patient’s becoming an informed consumer rather than a passive receiver of services, (d) the need for cost-effective approaches to the provision of health care services, and (e) a shift from hierarchical relationships to reciprocal peer relationships among health care providers (Mico, 1975).

One way to meet the challenges created by the shift away from the traditional medical model is to develop alliances among health care providers (i.e., to network). Networking is a process by which one uses contacts to share information, support, and extended resources. Networking links people in an ever-expanding communication network; it involves the use of personal contacts to solve problems (Kapustiak, Capello, & Hofmeister, 1985). Newsletters, continuing education programs, and professional and consumer organizations aid the networking process.

PACED: A Community Network

A 1979 survey of Pasadena, California, agencies providing services for disabled persons revealed that a wealth of resources was available but that no coordination of these services existed. A group of represe-
tatives from 16 local agencies (hospitals, the unified school district, training centers, city and state agencies) formed a coalition of services for disabled persons called PACED (Pasadena Awareness: A Community Effort With the Disabled). In 10 years, this group has grown to exceed 50 active agencies and institutions, including service providers, hospitals, long-term care facilities, vocational rehabilitation agencies, mental health centers, sheltered workshops, recreational facilities, and other health care agencies. The organization’s mission is to advocate, coordinate, and provide opportunities for persons with disabilities. It focuses on enhancing the abilities of disabled persons so that they may live independently within their families and community and obtain or retain suitable gainful employment.

Hundreds of networking organizations are functioning on local, regional, state, national, and international levels. PACED is an example of a local networking organization. Its membership includes occupational therapists employed in rehabilitation facilities, major hospitals, an independent living center, sheltered workshops, supportive work settings, the unified school district, children’s centers, mental health facilities, the University Affiliated Program at Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles, and the California Department of Rehabilitation. Networking affiliations among occupational therapists and other health professionals through PACED activities have produced a sense of belonging and practical work assistance.

The networking process has also provided a forum for problem solving. Participating rehabilitative therapists have direct contact with city personnel and officials and can identify transportation needs for patients relearning community mobility skills. Consequently, the local Dial-A-Ride program has become more sensitive to the special accessibility needs of various populations of disabled passengers and has expediently responded with changes in rules, regulations, and scheduling. Dial-A-Ride is a tax-supported, curb-to-curb transportation system for the elderly and persons with disabilities. The vans and small buses used in this system are owned by the city but operated by private contractors. Adults participating in the supportive employment program are benefiting from a change in hourly service. Many of them work on weekends and during hours other than those covered by the Dial-A-Ride schedule. To solve this problem, community occupational therapists were involved in discussions that resulted in accommodations being made in Dial-A-Ride’s transportation patterns.

Abbey Rents, a medical equipment firm, learned of the needs of persons using wheelchairs and traveling in vans for group recreational events. The firm responded by providing seat belts, at no cost, for special community outings.

Information sharing is a major benefit of the PACED networking process and has led to the development of a stronger partnership between consumers and public service providers. Most of the agencies affiliated with PACED share resources (e.g., staff time, space, technical assistance, financial support) for projects that address the issues and needs of disabled persons. This interagency cooperation has increased occupational therapy’s visibility, fostered a community referral network, and, most importantly, reduced duplication of services among community agencies.

Another networking group in Pasadena consists of persons and agencies interested in job development, job placement, and job coaching for disabled persons. The first author belongs to this group, as do representatives from Workability I (a high school work-training program), Workability II (a community-college work-based program), regional occupational programs, supported work programs, the California Department of Rehabilitation, the Employment Development Department (State of California), and the Job Training Partnership Act. Parents of disabled adolescents and adults also belong to this group. Bi-monthly meetings for networking and information sharing are held. Those occupational therapists who serve as representatives at network meetings have the opportunity to talk with members of other special interest networking groups, thus expanding contacts for information, advice, and resource sharing. This interaction begins a community networking of networks.

We, the authors, are involved in the PACED network, and our networking affiliations have extended our individual professional services beyond our own workplaces. All of us have become involved in non-traditional settings within the community and are active in interdisciplinary collaboration, consulting services, private industry, legislation, and community outreach programs.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

In 1984, the Administration of Developmental Disabilities awarded a grant to the University Affiliated Program at the Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles to establish the position of Coordinator of Transitional Youth and Adult Activities. The intent was to blend the University Affiliated Program’s resources with those of other public and private community agencies. Support was targeted to strengthen a community network system that was available to disabled youth and adults. The first author, an occupational therapist who had served for 18 years as a member of the Uni-
The University Affiliated Program’s interdisciplinary team, was given the opportunity to develop this linkage with a new community program.

The University Affiliated Program is an interdisciplinary training program through which professionals learn to work with disabled children and their families. This program joined PACED and has provided technical and professional assistance since 1984. The first author has served as a leader in PACED since 1985 and, as such, has participated in community workshops addressing employment for persons with disabilities; organized special events to publicly recognize the outstanding achievements of individuals who have served persons with disabilities; assisted in the establishment of the Mayor’s Committee for the Employment of the Disabled; worked on a task force addressing abuses of the elderly; participated in advocacy activities related to transportation, public building, and public beach accessibility; and planned for the recreational needs and other daily living activities of persons with disabilities. One of her most rewarding projects has been the promotion of community awareness through an annual art show for artists with disabilities. The interprofessional connections nurtured by the networking process allow for participation in diverse community projects that can greatly affect the lives of disabled citizens.

Consulting Services

As occupational therapy moves to meet the challenges of health promotion and health advocacy, its professional practitioners are becoming increasingly involved with consulting services. In 1961, a group of volunteers in Pasadena organized the New Opportunity Workshops, Inc., a training center for adults with multiple disabilities. The second author was asked to provide guidance for designing the habilitation services. Her suggestions played an important part in the organization of the training center. The second author gave occupational therapy leadership to this program for 22 years and developed a dynamic curriculum.

In 1984, however, a state mandate disallowed payment for occupational therapy in work activity centers, and the program was terminated. The second author decided to remain involved in the center as a volunteer. She focused on refining the vocational skills assessment, which she had initiated and used for many years. This resulted in the publication and nationwide distribution of the Adult Skills Evaluation Survey for Persons With Mental Retardation (ASES) (Herrick & Lowe, 1984). According to field-test reports, this instrument meets a need in the assessment of vocational performance in a work setting. Because good follow-up is essential to the networking process, contacts are being continued with the professionals using the assessment. This data collection has resulted in published revisions of the test manual leading to criterion-referenced standardization.

Another example of the provision of occupational therapy services through consultation is illustrated by a library program. The first author established working relations with the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Library system that enabled an occupational therapy perspective to be included in the library curriculum. This curriculum was designed to teach library use to persons with developmental disabilities and to library personnel serving these persons (Hurff, Poulsen, Van Hoven, & Olson, 1985). Occupational therapy insights and perspectives were also influential in some decisions made by the Pasadena Board of Education. The third author was involved with the educational testing of underachieving and gifted students. In this capacity, she could observe subtle indicators of neurological and motor dysfunction. Her occupational therapy expertise enabled her to see interfering patterns in a child’s responses and to view each student comprehensively and holistically. By observing the unique needs of disabled students, she was able to alert the board of education personnel to needed services or changes.

Gilfoyle (1987) spoke of creative partnerships with other health professionals and with the public as we work for a healthy society. The third author formed a partnership with educators that led to a special project for the racial integration of disabled youth within the Pasadena Unified School District. Years of community advocacy for a strong educational system created cross-generational exchanges, a unique community awareness, and useful networking alliances. This background formed the basis for the therapist's effective participation on a trusts and foundation committee. The committee grants funds to community-based organizations that assist children’s health and advance educational mainstreaming efforts. In this capacity, the occupational therapist was able to influence the inclusion of an occupational therapist position into a grant that funded services for disabled children. This new position plays a significant role in the evaluation of proposals and the awarding of grants.

Private Industry

The focus of occupational therapy on wellness requires a greater number of therapists to move patients from rehabilitation into productive employment. This process is enhanced by networking activities. After several years as a training and evaluation counselor in a workshop for adults with multiple disabilities, the fourth author began efforts to place qualified workshop clients into private industry. In trying to aid this
transition from the workshop to private industry through job placement, she became aware that, over
the years, industry has created an overwhelming bar-
rier to employment for people with disabilities.

Our environment is shaped by public policy, which in turn is a reflection of attitudes and values. Over time, fears, biases, and myths have influenced companies' hiring practices, resulting in a predomi-
nantly negative public policy toward persons with dis-
abilities (Hahn, 1986).

Departing from the traditional occupational ther-
apy role of training and evaluation, the fourth author
served as a placement specialist and an appointee to
the California Governor's Committee for Disabled
Persons. She worked directly with employers and
brought into city government and private industry the
"Windmills" attitudinal training program (Pimentel,
1981). The program consists of training modules
aimed primarily at middle managers, personnel man-
gers, and first-line supervisors. Modules include ex-
ercises designed to identify and address biases related
to the employment of disabled persons. Working with
the California Department of Rehabilitation and using
this link between clients and prospective employers,
this therapist brought about job development and
placement.

With increasing expertise in employment issues,
the fourth author combined her occupational therapy
knowledge with a rich community network of individ-
uals and agency contacts to establish a governmental
committee. She made many personal contacts and ini-
tiated efforts to establish an organizational framework
to educate employers and to increase public aware-
ness concerning employment for persons with dis-
abilities. She locally set into motion the requisites to
help found the Pasadena Mayor's Committee for the
Employment of the Disabled.

The first and fourth authors have played active roles on this
committee by (a) assisting in examining and evaluating
the city's current programs, policies, and services,
with a focus on eliminating barriers to access; (b)
examining access standards for public buildings; (c)
reviewing policies in other communities; and (d) rec-
ommending needed changes. Their efforts have
helped identify and resolve mobility limitations in a
newly planned police complex and in the design of an
aesthetically pleasing barrier-free access way to Pas-
dena's city hall, and they continue to monitor the ar-
chitectural plans for a city mall complex.

As business relationships were established, other
companies and employers began contacting the
fourth author for consultations in handling employees
who had become ill or been injured. Most of these
employees had either severe illnesses or injuries from
sports accidents. Before an injured worker returned to
the job, his or her departmental co-workers were in-
формed by the occupational therapist of attitudinal
barriers and were given helpful suggestions for deal-
ing with the residual effects of a worker's disability.
This made the employer, the co-workers, and the dis-
abled worker more comfortable with one another.

Job modification is another appropriate occupa-
tional therapy intervention in private industry. In one
case, the fourth author, the employment specialist,
modified a job at the Pacific Bell Company to enable a
person with postpolio quadriplegia to qualify as a
computer information services operator. The com-
puter keyboard was raised so that this employee could
type easily with a mouth stick. The worker was able to
exceed the productivity rate of 550 entries per day.
Additionally, this worker was provided with an atten-
dant who, each day, brought her to the work site and
placed her at the workstation. Her lunch break was
extended from 1/2 hour to 1 hour so that her atten-
dant could help her with suctioning, eating, and other
activities of daily living. Because the workstation itself
was not modified, other employees could use it in the
disabled worker's absence by lowering the computer
to desk height.

Awareness of appropriate work laws and rights
permitted the fourth author to effectively coordinate
activities with various governmental and rehabilita-
tion agencies, provide information to employees and
employers about important work laws, advocate for
the disabled worker, and assist employers in hiring
persons with disabilities.

Legislation

Pasadena's board of directors recently established an
accessibility task force to advise the board of prob-
lems with access to physical, work, social, and cultural
environments for citizens with disabilities. The first
and fourth authors have played active roles on this
task force by (a) assisting in examining and evaluating
the city's current programs, policies, and services,
with a focus on eliminating barriers to access; (b)
examining access standards for public buildings; (c)
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newly planned police complex and in the design of an
aesthetically pleasing barrier-free access way to Pas-
dena's city hall, and they continue to monitor the ar-
chitectural plans for a city mall complex.

The third author was selected to be a field repre-
sentative for a member of the Pasadena City Council.
This unique opportunity allowed the therapist to use
her community involvement experience to address
current civic challenges. Moving from the traditional
medical setting into a community role, as this ther-
pist did, often gives occupational therapists the
chance to advocate for and speak publicly on behalf of
the disabled population. Advocacy efforts are ex-
tended and strengthened by the networking process. The adage of not what you know, but who you know, holds true here. The therapist who maintains his or her personal integrity and becomes a respected member of the networking community has a greater opportunity to effect change, to influence important civic decisions, and to enlighten the public about disability issues.

Community Outreach Programs

Contact with clients in a workshop encouraged the second author to initiate a Sunday church program for them. The church is one of the most active agencies providing volunteer services to persons with mental retardation. Local churches can have a tremendous impact in their communities when they reach out to the chronically disabled. The Shepherd’s Class, an outreach ministry of the Lake Avenue Congregational Church in Pasadena, offers a year-round program of Sunday classes and special events for young people and adults with disabilities. The congregation plans and oversees the activities for an annual weekend camp at Mt. Palomar, California. The second author participates in this camping program by planning a mix of constructive and creative recreation in which both mentally retarded and non-mentally retarded participants can enjoy the benefits of fun and fellowship. The church affirms this camp program by sharing in an annual jog-a-thon/walk-a-thon that recruits 50 volunteers to join the 75 campers.

The second author’s background in occupational therapy led her to become involved in a community program that uses companion animals to improve the quality of life for persons of all ages with disabilities. The program is operated by the Pasadena Humane Society and emphasizes regular visits to long-term care facilities.

The first author has been a leader in the PACED Art Show, an annual exhibit for artists with disabilities that began in response to Pasadena’s centennial celebration. In the first show, held in 1986 at the Pasadena Plaza Mall, the artwork was hung in the large walkway space, thus providing high visibility to the artists’ pieces and giving the public exposure to the varied services of the PACED member agencies. More importantly, the event raised the level of community understanding and appreciation for the abilities and the needs of the “handicapable.”

Artwork from three of these shows was hung in art galleries in Old Town Pasadena. Approximately 50 works from 41 disabled artists who chose the visual arts as a medium for expressing their unusual life experiences were featured. The artists represented all ages and all levels of development. This project became a strong community commitment. Volunteers from many agencies devoted much of their time to these shows. Local prominent restaurants donated food and entertainment. Businesses and private foundations awarded money for the exhibit, and private citizens contributed in various ways.

This endeavor was so successful that the sponsors received special recognition from the Pasadena Mayor’s Committee for the Employment of the Disabled for encouraging self-employment for many severely disabled artists. In addition, thousands of dollars of income were generated from the sale of art pieces. Another positive outcome of these exhibits, a video production entitled “Picture Me Abled,” available to the public through PACED, reveals the attitudes and feelings of three of the participating artists.

The first and fourth authors have been involved in the “Kids on the Block” program, a show involving disabled and abled puppets who represent the world as it could be tomorrow. Its mission is to teach children what it is like to be disabled and how one can appreciate individual differences. This is accomplished through the use of field-tested scripts and a question-and-answer session following each performance. Four of these puppets were awarded to the Mayor’s Committee for the Employment of the Disabled and to PACED for cooperative use. The fourth author assumed a scheduling role within the public and private school systems. The first author has recruited, trained, and performed “Kids on the Block” presentations in local classrooms. Each school visit exposes 150 to 500 youths to the personalities, accomplishments, limitations, and needs of persons with disabilities. The first author’s background in developmental disabilities has been most helpful in the performance aspect of this program and in her ability to accurately answer the students’ questions in an age-appropriate manner.

Networking: The Tie That Binds

We, the authors, have benefited from formal networks within our own professional fields. Michael (1987) illustrated the networking process as it relates to important and powerful parts of the professional managerial structure in occupational therapy. What began as informal contacts between colleagues and members of various agencies in the Pasadena area is now more formalized to expedite desired outcomes for persons requiring services. “The rewards of networking come from empowering other people. Teaching and sharing information with others allows creativity, research, and hindsight to be applied to mutual problem solving” (Staff, 1987, p. 1). Kapustiak et al. (1985) identified the benefits and drawbacks of
networking. They outlined networking etiquette and networking mechanics, which they considered to be the day-to-day methods used to build networks (see Figure 1).

Learning to network more systematically requires practice and experience. The following rules have been applied to the networking group process:

1. **Keep a focus.** A network is formed to meet certain goals. The original intent for its formation may become obscured as new interests and relationships develop. As the major focus of the network becomes obscured, the probability increases that the network will cease to meet the needs of its membership.

2. **Stay in touch.** Communication is the key to networking. Membership contacts should occur regularly every few weeks or months.

3. **Keep it small.** Networks may overlap, but each is more workable if it is small and well focused.

4. **Keep it simple and cheap.** The effectiveness of a network can be diminished by complexity and by high costs to its active participants.

5. **Reciprocate.** The essence of a network is cooperation, a mutual give-and-take relationship, and the knowledge that participants can count on each other. (Backer & Vash, 1984)

Besides the group dynamics involved in networking, personal qualities are also important. Stark (1985) provided suggestions for the development of one's personal attributes as a networker through visibility and familiarity.

**Visibility.** One needs to be seen and to see, which requires meeting and communicating with as many people as possible. Act like a host, not like a guest who sits back and waits to be introduced. This requires courage and is difficult for many people because meeting new people makes one vulnerable. A successful networker enjoys meeting new people. To remain visible, one must remember names: The sweetest sound to a person is his or her own name. Share business cards and maintain a follow-up contact system.

**Familiarity.** People contact people they know; they are creative and more effective with people they know and like. Some ways to maintain familiarity are as follows:

- Ask people questions. If you are interested in people, they will be interested in you.
- If you have an opportunity to do someone a favor, do it. It could be your savings account for the day when you need assistance.
- Always maintain your courtesy. Discourtesy will be remembered. Write notes of thanks and you will be remembered.
- Develop the skill of small talk. Successful networkers are masters of current events and small talk.

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**Table 1. Characteristics of Networking.**

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<th>ADVANTAGES</th>
<th>vs.</th>
<th>DISADVANTAGES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bridge between resources and service needs</td>
<td>Personal investment</td>
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<td>Access to other health providers</td>
<td>Attention to the networking process</td>
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<td>Mutual support system</td>
<td>Necessary time commitment</td>
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<td>Use of others as resources</td>
<td>Occasional inconvenience</td>
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<td>Expanded communication</td>
<td>Expenses (dues, mailings, meetings)</td>
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<td>Problem solving, feedback, and brainstorming opportunities</td>
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<td>Information/experience sharing</td>
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<td>Referrals</td>
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<td>Career assistance/advancement/growth</td>
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**Table 2. Networking Amenities and Techniques.**

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<th>NETWORKING AMENITIES</th>
<th>and</th>
<th>NETWORKING TECHNIQUES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Maintain your trust and confidence in others and theirs in you.</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Newsletters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be dependable and honest in your dealings.</td>
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<td>Continuing education</td>
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<td>Avoid being critical.</td>
<td>Professional/consumer organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give others the right to make their own decisions.</td>
<td>Devices to maintain contacts</td>
<td>Business cards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be ready to give as much as you get and more.</td>
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<td>Index card system</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be professional at all times/maintain confidentiality.</td>
<td>Computer</td>
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<td>Honor your promises.</td>
<td>Agency/organization directories</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follow up and report back promptly.</td>
<td>Memory jogger</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utilize potential opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Include a wide range of people and organizations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be patient/do not expect immediate answers.</td>
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• Maintain a positive image. Know who you are and what your image is, and then present these characteristics consistently and confidently. Be approachable.
• Improve your written and oral communication skills. Communication claims 80% of our waking hours. This part of our life deserves attention and improvement.
• Maintain a positive, enthusiastic outlook about yourself and your surrounding world.

Conclusion
This article has discussed our diverse experiences as occupational therapists who work within the community by contributing to health teams, providing consulting services, interacting with social service agencies and public and private industry, contributing to the legislative process, and engaging in various community programs. The four of us are applying our occupational therapy training to persons with special needs who are struggling to meet the demands of being effective players, students, workers, family members, and community participants.

The process of networking has extended and strengthened our individual professional efforts. A wealth of ideas has emerged from our relationships with one another. Networking helps us to recognize the value of nurturing and maintaining relationships and of keeping in touch with people who cross our paths in life.

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