

# Big Business Networking, Part III: Rise of the CNO?

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In the first two parts of this series, we looked at the successes and challenges of the way big and small business network with each other and the way big business networks internally and externally.

This month we look at what is either a new big business trend or a fad, depending upon whom you ask. I'm referring to the CNO, or Chief Networking Officer. Never heard of one? That's okay. The idea is relatively new and not yet entirely embraced by the conventional business community.

## The past

One of the earliest examples of the CNO is Selma Prodonovic, who in 2003 founded [brainswork™](#) in Vienna, Austria. She proclaimed herself Chief Networking Officer in acknowledgement that every successful business has at least one "rainmaker" who can leverage his or her own network to get the quickest, most effective results. Today her company has offices all over the world and provides network coaching and training to businesses of all sizes.

The CNO title resurfaced in January, 2006 when Udo Hamm was named CNO and Head of Community Development of Hamburg-based openBC (now known to as [XING](#)), an online network that is growing in acceptance even here in the U.S.

## The present

What's the status of the CNO today? Was this some European fad like the Lambada, doomed to fizzle out here in the States? Not according to directors Moshe Weiss and Norman Meyers of [CNOPartners.com](#). Both are experienced in big business environments and are looking to champion the cause.

"We refer to the CNO as more of a function than a title," says Meyers, who defines "function" as a collection of skills relating to the management of social capital within an organization. Current titles that might include these functions are "VP of Business Development," "Director of Human Resources," "Chief Information Officer," and "Business Relationship Manager."

According to Weiss, that collection of skills includes, but is not limited to:

- serving as a role model and resource for the entire organization
- championing the development of soft skills
- being a consensus-builder
- acting as an agent of change
- communicating across cultural barriers
- developing strategic alliances
- fostering collaborative development
- promoting a customer-centric attitude

## The future

Will American business eventually embrace the CNO? Weiss and Meyers believe it's bound to happen—if certain obstacles are overcome first, the main one being the current lack of standards in this area. “[The CNO function] is not practical until it is coupled with a form of measurement,” says Meyers, referring to corporate America's need to tie the function into ROI.

To help that happen, Weiss and Meyers, along with fellow CNOPartner Director Adam Atlas, are part of a growing movement of corporate professionals establishing standards through an organization called Neutral Third Party, or [N3P.org](http://N3P.org). N3P's mission is to gather consensus from “industry powerhouses” to develop new data standards and software applications based upon the Universal Enterprise Infrastructure, or “infra” for short. The infra is an online database application system that conforms to N3P's five [global enterprise standards](#) regarding data, procedures, quality, architecture, and technology.

CNOPartners' interest in N3P's infra lies in their sponsorship of the Meta Relationship Networking Project (MRN), which will “integrate everything a networker needs into a single platform” using cell phones and other internet-based devices.

Having the MRN and other related tools, measurements, and standards in place will enable the CNO to rise to more prominence. Increasingly, big business is about tapping into the “global village” and as Weiss puts it, “Organizations can no longer afford to see themselves as an island.”

The ramifications of this are considerable, and the challenges are many. For instance, many employees get “gun shy” when it comes to networking, usually because management tends to frown upon it. A mail clerk from Company A who spends work time on LinkedIn or MySpace may appear to be avoiding work. On the other hand, that mail clerk could be chatting with a friend, the CEO of Company B, who might be a potential customer of Company A.

As progressive corporations of the twenty-first century begin to better manage their social capital by tapping into the networks of their employees, changes will take place.

- Major consideration for hiring will be based upon whom the prospective hires know.
- Networking skills, like computer skills, will become a new “must-have” for getting the best jobs.
- Old-style, monolithic, hierarchical organizations will have to overcome ego because more emphasis will be placed upon individuals and their networks.

Boundaries are the result of a person's desire for control, and networking is the leading catalyst for removal of boundaries. The rise to prominence of the CNO may force big business to confront this issue. Whether the CNO is a trend or a fad, one of the most respected positions within a company or corporate enemy number one, remains to be determined.