Building Networks: The National and International Experiences of AUTM

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ABSTRACT

Developing and implementing best practices in intellectual property (IP) management requires several critical inputs, and building networks is among the most important. The experience of the Association of University Technology Managers (AUTM) serves as an excellent example of how to build and maintain such networks. The important lessons learned as AUTM grew and expanded its networks are broadly applicable to building dynamic, productive, and sustainable networks anywhere in the world. Furthermore, since AUTM is an association of individual, rather than institutional or organizational members, it functions all the more as a catalyst for networking. Networking provides two important benefits. First, it facilitates relationships between individuals with varied experience, expertise, and skill sets, encouraging individuals to contribute to each other's professional expertise. Second, the network itself contributes to the overall quality of group performance. Working through networks, practitioners exchange ideas and experiences to form best practices that become performance standards for individuals and their institutions. Networks thereby contribute to building IP management capacity at both the individual and institutional levels, and this capacity building then feeds back to further support and expand the network. This chapter considers the networking practices established by AUTM. It charts the organization's growth over a period of 30 years from a small group of U.S. and Canadian patent managers to an association of more than 3,400 members from countries on every continent.[1] As the story of AUTM demonstrates, networks can begin locally and gradually expand to operate on a national, regional, and even international scale. However, as AUTM has shown, the organization itself must begin with—and steadfastly maintain—a clear and focused central mission.

1. INTRODUCTION

Networking among peers in any profession generally provides two important benefits. It encourages relationships between individual practitioners, some of whom may be highly skilled while others are less so. Regardless of the proficiency levels of individuals, each one contributes to the experience of every other. Whether individuals function as mentors or apprentices, the one-on-one interactions raise the level of each person's expertise and professionalism. Moreover, networking contributes to the overall quality of group performance. By working through networks, practitioners exchange ideas and experiences, developing best practices that become standards for performance. The Association of University Technology Managers (AUTM) provides a shining example of how this process can benefit an organization. The history of the AUTM provides a solid case study of the usefulness and power of networking.

2. FORMING A NETWORK TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

AUTM began its journey as a direct result of networking. Coming together as a small group to solve a set of common problems in the mid-1970s, a handful of individuals formed a network that would eventually grow into AUTM. Midway through 2006, the total membership

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stood at 3,494. The organization plays a global role in developing academic technology transfer as a unique profession.

AUTM, or more accurately its antecedent, the Society of University Patent Administrators (SUPA), did not start out to establish a new profession. Rather, it started as a loose organization of individuals, notably *not* institutions, who saw a need to work together to solve problems. The problems of the day were specific to the then-current university patenting situation in the United States. A jumbled array of inconsistent patent policies among U.S. government agencies funding research at U.S. universities made for a difficult landscape for early practitioners of university technology transfer. At the same time, a few experienced individuals recognized that other issues involving patenting and licensing periodically emerged in their daily activities as university licensing professionals. Patenting and licensing concerns were not commonly understood by the colleagues of these individuals. Although there were relatively few U.S. universities engaged in technology transfer in the mid-1970s, there was enough activity to suggest a need for an association of individuals who could help each other. In the beginning, AUTM (SUPA, at the time) was chartered to create networks of individuals who would find solutions to problems arising from the complex legislative landscape in the United States and who could provide useful interpersonal linkages to help understand and deal with the complexities of patent licensing.

3. EARLY DAYS: DEVELOPING THE MISSION

Early efforts to draw new members into the fledgling organization could succeed only if organizing filled a need. Articulating a mission was then, as now, indispensable to creating sustainable networks. While the word *networking* was not commonly used in those days, the enumerated purposes for establishing the organization included, among others, "*generating self-help programs to enable universities to establish an in-house patent technology and licensing capability*" and "*effecting interchange of views amongst university patent administrators.*" These goals certainly match the modern concept of *networking*. These early efforts to articulate a useful mission were successful: at its first annual meeting in 1976, some 51 individuals paid a $30 fee to join SUPA.

No two networks are alike, nor is the process by which they are formed. Each network is a unique creation formed by different people for different purposes. Each grows according to the activities its members choose to focus on. Often, the role a network takes on is influenced by external factors that simply *happen*. Such was the case with SUPA. Its unexpected ability to wield influence through its networking capacity became apparent early on, as its members were rallied to gather support for the most significant piece of legislation to affect university technology transfer in the United States: the Bayh-Dole Act.[2] By using the organization as a pulpit from which information about the Bayh-Dole bill could be broadcast, SUPA was able to give members the information they needed to urge their own congressional representatives to support the bill. The organization gained public recognition from this early experience of energizing its member network. It continues to play a role in virtually all U.S. federal policy efforts that involve technology transfer at universities.

4. EXPANDING GEOGRAPHIC BOUNDARIES

Today, AUTM's membership is an ethnically and culturally diverse group with individuals from around the globe. This diversity is due, in part, to another external factor that played an unanticipated role in expanding the AUTM network. While there was no overt intention to reach beyond U.S. boundaries during SUPA's formation in 1974 and 1975, the organization embraced Canadian institutions nearly from the start. It happened quite naturally that Canadian members were included because of their personal connections and relationships to SUPA's organizers and also, perhaps, because a mailing list was used that reached across the United States/Canadian border. The outreach encouraged a contingent of six Canadians to attend SUPA's first annual meeting in 1976. By 1978, SUPA had its first Canadian trustee, and a concerted effort was made to extend information about

SUPA to licensing practitioners in Canadian universities. Another reason for AUTM's international membership had to do, no doubt, with the omission of any geographical or national limitations in early membership requirements. Membership was open to "*any individual who has some responsibility for the administration of inventions and/or intellectual property at an institution of higher learning.…*" Although not part of the early planning, the fact of early Canadian involvement paved the way for AUTM to grow as an *inclusive*, rather than *exclusive*, global network. By not limiting its membership, SUPA was providing avenues along which global networking could begin to develop.

5. DEVELOPING A NETWORKING STRUCTURE

Early decisions to structure AUTM as an association of individual, rather than institutional or organizational members, laid the foundation for the organization as a catalyst for networking. The first step in developing its networking capacity was to use *regionalization* as the best mode for organizing subgroups, rather than using public/private, big/small or other classification schemes. Organizing by U.S. geographical regions (East, Central, West), and then forming a Canadian region, promoted networking in several important ways. It helped individuals in the same geographical region to become acquainted with one another and provided opportunities for discussing issues that were common to their region. Closer regional associations also promoted faster and more-satisfactory resolutions of ownership and licensing issues where faculty and students in neighboring institutions actively partnered in research. Organizing in regional cohorts also laid the groundwork for local summer meetings that AUTM introduced in 1992. The purpose of the new format of regional summer meetings was expressly to provide small, informal meeting venues that were more conducive to forming personal relationships than were general meetings attended by the membership at large.

In 1978, the organization took a second step to expand opportunities for member networking by adopting a category of affiliate membership. Individuals can be admitted as affiliate members if they are, "*engaged either directly or indirectly in activities relating to the administration of intellectual property… and [their] organization interacts with institutions of higher education or teaching hospitals.*"[3] An important reason for introducing the affiliate-member category was to provide an opportunity for regular members to make contacts with prospective licensees, as well as with service providers such as patent counsel. Through these opportunities, members could begin to develop personal networks among companies considered to be customers. AUTM recognized that networking could be used as a marketing tool to build relationships with potential customers. The decision to do so had a tremendous impact on the growth of the organization.

Through trial and error, AUTM adopted an internal structure to support its networking goals. Initially, the management structure did not include any position dedicated to enriching networking activities. But as the organization's membership grew and its educational activities expanded, it became clear that AUTM had to pay closer attention to specific member needs. Over a period of two years, between 1993 and 1995, AUTM reorganized and made networking a fundamental focus of its organization. This was accomplished by adding two new positions to the board of trustees: a vice president for membership and a vice president for communications. Further strengthening its commitment to the networking needs of its members, the organization added a vice president for affiliate members to the AUTM board in 1997, and in 2000, the organization created a vice president for international relations position. AUTM has made other recent changes at the trustee level to support and bring greater emphasis to its network. A vice president for public policy supports the efforts of AUTM's members to speak in a collective voice on relevant policy matters. In addition, because the organizing of the annual meeting and the data gathering function, overseen by the Metrics and Survey Committee, have emerged as the primary interests of the organization's membership, these two functions (formerly under a single vice

president) are now represented on the AUTM board by two separate vice presidents.

6. MEMBER NETWORKING

While supporting networking through the organizational structure is an indispensable activity, more than structure is needed to instill networking as a seamless part of a member's experience. Over the past 30 years, AUTM has pursued different avenues to reach this goal:

- The AUTM Web site went online in 1995. It provides members with online access to shared information. Networking is specifically addressed through a MEMBER CONNECT capability that allows members to find and communicate directly with one another through email.[4]
- The *AUTM Newsletter* provides information and articles of current interest. The newsletter is now delivered six times a year electronically, and members receive weekly updates by email.
- Educational courses are held throughout the year to provide professional education to both new and more experienced members. These courses directly contribute to the overall quality and influence of the AUTM member network.
- Special interest groups (SIGs) encourage members with particular interests to meet together to discuss issues and solve problems. Each SIG meets in conjunction with AUTM's annual meeting.
- Summer meetings are held in each AUTM region, with networking opportunities forming a major element of program planning. Special workshops promoting networking have been included in both summer and annual meeting programs.
- Activities at AUTM's annual meeting that support its networking goals include:
  - logistical and space planning to facilitate *networking breaks,* which serve to support prearranged and impromptu meetings
  - social events specifically arranged to promote relationship building, such as sporting events, receptions, group dinners, and a special reception for new members to facilitate their first AUTM networking opportunity
  - specific time set aside for each AUTM region to meet
  - one afternoon dedicated to SIG meetings
  - the Networking Fair, first held in conjunction with the 2000 annual meeting, providing a forum for members to meet with affiliate members looking for new licensing opportunities (The fair enables members to build their own marketing networks and has become a major annual meeting event.)
  - the Innovation Showcase, introduced at the 2006 annual meeting, gives AUTM members an opportunity to formally present new and promising technologies to AUTM's network of affiliate members (The 2006 showcase produced several relationships with potential licensees. As another successful example of promoting networking among AUTM's members and their customers, the showcase will be repeated at the 2007 annual meeting and after, as interest warrants.)

Forming an integral part of the AUTM structure, most of these efforts continue today.

Metrics are one way to measure the importance of organizational activities to members and to gauge the success of the organizational efforts to support those activities. An AUTM survey conducted in 2005 was especially instructive, as it measured the importance of networking to AUTM members. The survey results indicated that networking with colleagues was cited as a primary reason for *joining* AUTM by 22% of respondents; and 51% of respondents cited networking with colleagues as the reason for *remaining* an AUTM member. Networking was by far the most important reason for retained memberships. Thirty-eight percent of respondents selected networking as the second most important reason for joining AUTM. It is clear from the survey that working to build successful member

networks should remain a primary focus for the association.

7. BUILDING AUTM'S INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS

7.1 *Options*

AUTM has long debated how to extend its member network beyond the United States and Canada to include relationships with technology transfer professionals in other countries. The importance of learning from counterparts in Europe, Asia, South America, and elsewhere was always regarded as an important goal. Memberships were routinely accepted from individuals from any country who fit the regular-member or affiliate-member definitions. However, member surveys and questionnaires through the 1980s up until the mid-1990s showed that most Canadian and U.S. members were not engaged in enough global activities to warrant placing the question of how to "internationalize" on the AUTM agenda.

As globalization increased during the 1990s, the situation changed. More institutions were doing business abroad, and there were more and more requests for memberships from foreign countries (although foreign members still account for only a small fraction of all AUTM memberships). It is probably fair to say that a major factor in AUTM's thrust onto the global stage was the publication of two important works by the organization in 1994: the *AUTM Technology Transfer Practice Manual* and the first annual AUTM Licensing Survey™. These enhanced the organization's reputation for leadership in technology transfer, both at home and abroad. Requests for translation rights to the practice manual made it clear that AUTM had provided a practical resource for technology transfer professionals regardless of nationality, and the AUTM licensing survey provided a model that other countries and geopolitical units could look to in measuring their own technology transfer activities.

Despite growing international interest, AUTM responded slowly. This hesitation was due not to any lack of interest in networking with international colleagues, but rather to cautiousness about selecting the structure for the interaction. Any networking organization that begins regionally but wishes to expand must consider how the expansion fits in with the its mission. The organization must decide whether it can expand without compromising that mission and whether, in the case of AUTM, it should attempt, as a wider organization, to extend beyond its borders, or leave it to disparate national regions to do so individually. AUTM wrestled with these questions throughout the 1990s. It considered proposals for international growth that ranged from marketing materials worldwide, under the AUTM brand, to franchising. The organization weighed the options of establishing an "international region," that would mirror the United States and Canadian regions, with establishing a looser type of structure where networking, sharing of educational materials, and joint meetings would form the basis for AUTM's international relationships.

The path toward finding an appropriate international role for AUTM formally began with its agreement in 1997 to partner with Science Alliance in sponsoring a conference in Amsterdam aimed at European participation. The success of this conference resulted in similar conferences sponsored jointly by AUTM and Science Alliance in 1998 and 1999. Partly as a result of networking at these conferences, Europe formed its own organization, the Association of European Science and Technology Transfer Professionals (ASTP) while UNICO, among others, was formed in Britain. In a sense, then, AUTM's approach to internationalizing was determined not by AUTM, but by the *individuals* who would people the new international organizations. Those individuals answered the question for themselves. They would have most to gain, in terms of networking and education, by forming their own independent organizations to focus on regional issues. And as these organizations now begin to grow their own networking capacities, they may find AUTM's experience useful.

This is not the end of the story, however. Although AUTM had decided neither to franchise itself nor to form an international region, international interest in AUTM's educational and

networking activities was growing. Without compromising its initial mission of education, networking, and influencing academic technology transfer directions in the United States, AUTM added a vice president for international relations to its board of trustees in 2000. In the same year, AUTM hosted its first independent international conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, attracting 182 participants from 18 countries.

7.2 *Networking for a global impact*

AUTM's current challenge is to meet the networking and educational needs of colleagues in developing countries. A first major step in this effort has been to offer very low-cost electronic memberships (US$10 per year) to colleagues in developing countries. Electronic memberships give these members electronic access to AUTM's publications and news updates and provide these members with opportunities to participate directly in AUTM activities—all without paying the higher costs associated with regular memberships. In an effort to build a global network of partnerships, AUTM is seeking to form sustainable relationships with organizations such as MIHR (Centre for the Management of Intellectual Property in Health Research and Development) and WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization).

7.3 *Networking as part of strategic planning*

While network building has been central to AUTM's organizational efforts from its inception, in many respects networking among members has naturally *happened* without robust or direct planning. Nonetheless, as a result of recent changes in AUTM's strategic planning, *networking* will command a center stage with two strategic goals: (1) to specifically identify and gather a number of essential skills and best practices that have been learned through AUTM's networking activities, and (2) to add a new networking component that will establish networks with other organizations that have related interests. The latter goal is explained as an effort "*[to] develop a networking map of key organizations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, and individuals with whom AUTM wishes to collaborate.*"[5]

8. CONCLUSIONS

Network building by any professional organization or association comes from a unique combination of individual member preferences, goals adopted by the organization, and factors that happen randomly. Thus, the experience of AUTM is unique simply because there is only one AUTM. It is not unique, however, in terms of adopting networking practices and activities that are driven by the fundamental interests of its members and that seek to encourage both learning and mentorship based on shared experiences. This goal represents a universal maxim of network building that can be applied across the world, in both developed and developing countries. Strong member networks build quality and integrity by adopting best practices that have been tested and found to be successful. Building networks both among its members and with aligned organizations provides the credibility an organization needs if it aspires to a leadership position in its sphere of operation. The AUTM experience may be helpful for others seeking to reach those goals.

Networks, as groups of like-minded, mission-driven professionals, can be formed at different geographical levels in order to serve various functions. This multilevel approach allows organizations to address different aspects of their respective missions:

- Local networking creates opportunities to work with colleagues who are in the immediate vicinity. They might be working on similar problems, and so such networks can build synergistic collaborations.
- National networking can be a useful mechanism for working with colleagues to encourage national legislation that addresses IP and technology transfer. National networking can also be useful for designing and implementing systems for appropriate IP management, training, and education.
- Regional networking provides opportunities to work with neighboring countries in coordinated research and development endeavors and related IP management and technology transfer initiatives and includes building AUTM-like organizations.

- International networking will become increasingly important as globalization advances. Building networks with colleagues from around the world will provide opportunities for many forms of technology transfer and for building IP management capacity. ■

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1 The author gratefully acknowledges the contribution to this chapter by Jon Sandelin. (Sandelin J. 2004. *Association of University Technology Managers: 30 Years of Innovation*. Association of University Technology Managers: Northbrook, Ill.) While the work is not quoted herein except as noted, it provided a history of AUTM that would not have been otherwise available.

2 35 U.S.C. § 200–212 (1980, 1984).

3 See AUTM Bylaws, Article IV: Categories of Membership: Affiliate Members. www.autm.net.

4 www.autm.net.

5 AUTM Strategic Plan, adopted by the board of trustees, 1 March 2006. www.autm.net.