

## MAINTAINING YOUR VIRTUAL PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORK (PLN)

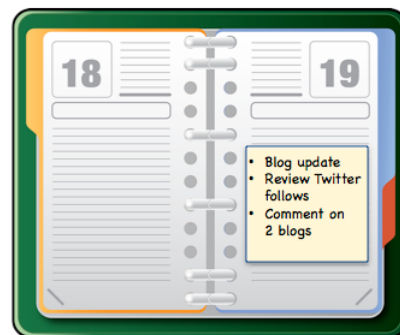
As we saw last week, you can systematically build a virtual PLN by taking steps such as defining your purpose, making connections in a manageable way, observing interactions, “spiraling out” from useful contacts and resources, and then consuming, producing, and sharing content in your network. Your virtual network will grow considerably over time. At that point, teachers may feel like their network is too big to manage or that they spend too much time trying to keep up with all of the information their network provides. This week, we will address a few common concerns related to maintaining a mature PLN.

Also, in addition to using the tips below to maintain your virtual PLN, you can organize and curate your entire PLN (virtual and face-to-face components) by using a graphic organizer like the **PLN Action Planner** provided as a downloadable resource in this week’s Teacher’s Corner content. This planner is designed to help you set short-term and long-term goals for your network and to encourage you to reflect on your current interest areas for informal professional development. This tool is a helpful resource for EFL teachers who are new to PLNs and those who have a well-established network. Be sure to check it out!

### MAINTAINING YOUR VIRTUAL PLN – ADDRESSING COMMON CONCERNS

#### Concern 1: Network Fatigue – “I don’t have time for this!”

- **Use “dead time”:** If you have mobile access to content in your virtual PLN, bus rides, waiting in line, and similar situations are great times to check in on your network. Even if you can’t read a full article or post that catches your eye, you can bookmark it and return to it later.
- **Make appointments with yourself:** Consider setting aside dedicated time each week to review content in your professional network. For example, you may block off three 30-minute chunks per week in your calendar to focus on connecting with your network.
- **Set “bite-sized” goals:** It is impossible to keep up with all of the information and people in your network every day. Set small, manageable goals to make your network work for you. Remember that this your personal learning network for informal learning. You decide how and when to use it.



#### Concern 2: Fear of Missing Out

Once some teachers establish a PLN and start to see benefits from it, they feel anxious if they aren’t constantly monitoring it because they don’t want to miss any of the useful information that is circulating. This fear of missing out can cause unnecessary worry. It is important to occasionally unplug and reevaluate how you are using your network. Your PLN isn’t going to feel neglected if you take a break. Again, you decide how much and how often to engage with your PLN – it shouldn’t rule your schedule.

#### Concern 3: “Echo Chambers”

One of the benefits of your PLN is that you can connect with people around the world that share your professional interests and beliefs. However, believe it or not, this can also be a drawback. If your

network always reinforces what you already believe, is it challenging you to grow as a professional? This situation is called an “echo chamber” because what you think and believe is constantly mirrored or repeated by information sources in your network. Be sure to seek out diverse connections that don’t always agree with you: use your PLN to connect with teachers in different cultures and contexts, explore alternative opinions, and examine new or controversial issues in the TEFL/Applied Linguistics field.

#### **Concern 4: Overgrown networks**

Some teachers are tempted to try every new networking tool and have several hundred connections in their network. Managing these “overgrown” systems can be difficult and may lead to network fatigue. Schedule occasional network clean up sessions to remove unneeded contacts, tools, and resources that aren’t directly helping you reach your professional development goals. You can’t hurt a virtual networking tool’s feelings – if it isn’t working for you, don’t be afraid to let it go.

#### **Concern 5: Managing a network of networks**

Even after you have streamlined your PLN’s contents, you may still be left with several networking tools, websites, and resources that benefit your teaching. It can be time extremely time-consuming to log in and check each system individually. To save time, consider using an aggregator (from “to aggregate,” which means “to bring together”). Aggregators are websites or tools that let you monitor several networking resources from one place. Feedly, Symbaloo, Flipboard, and Hootsuite are examples of sites with aggregation functions. Do a search for social network aggregators, explore them, and decide if any of them can increase your efficiency and save time as you manage your PLN.

**Disclaimer:** Names of non-U.S. Department of State websites and social media platforms mentioned in this Teacher’s Corner resource are provided for illustrative purposes only; their inclusion here should not be seen as an endorsement of their content, views, or privacy policies.