

NETWORKING OVERVIEW

If you are like 95% of my clients, you don't like networking, and don't feel confident in your ability to network. That's fine. Networking is a skill, and it can be learned.

Here's what networking ISN'T:

- Asking people for a job
- Pressuring people to connect you to someone important
- Bragging about how wonderful you are
- Using people

Networking IS an exchange of information. You are talking to people to discover what they might know about your field and to ask them for advice (People love to be asked for their advice. Don't you?). Everyone networks, all the time, we just don't call it that. For example, if you were new to a neighborhood, you would ask someone where to find the nearest post office or dry cleaner. Networking for career reasons is essentially the same thing. You say "I'm new to this job search or career, where should I go to get information?"

NETWORKING PREPARATION

Begin your network of contacts by developing a list of anyone who could be a resource for information, advice or referrals. Be sure to include everyone in your personal and professional worlds: family, neighbors, colleagues, other professionals, classmates and members of groups to which you belong, such as a church or synagogue. Remember that sometimes the best contacts come from the least likely places, so make your list as inclusive as possible. Review your list and put a star next to the names of those people most likely to provide you with the best information. Notice how many people are already in your network. Decide who would be easiest to call. For some, these are close friends or colleagues, for others, it is easier to talk to complete strangers.

"I'M NOT LOOKING FOR A JOB....."

Never, ever, ask anyone for a job. To most job-seekers, this is counterintuitive. Of course, you are looking for a job, so there is no need to hide that information. But the minute you ask someone for a job lead ("Know of any openings?"), you have unnecessarily limited your conversation, and you may have alienated a valuable contact.

Instead of asking for job leads, try something along the following lines:

- “I have been in marketing for 10 years, but I have become interested in the field of financial planning. I’d love to speak with a certified financial planner. Do you know of anyone in the field?”
- “Your neighbor runs a sailing school? That’s always been a dream of mine. Do you think he’d mind speaking with me? May I have his name? Can I use your name when I call him?”
- “I will be finishing a graduate program in human resources development in the spring. I am trying to get a sense of the HRD field in the D.C. area. What companies do you consider to be leaders in the HR field? Can you suggest people at those companies that I should speak with?”
- “I understand that Marriott’s financial division is expanding. I’d love to find out more about the company. Do you know anyone at Marriott that I could speak with?”
- “As you know, Monolith Communications laid off a number of people last month, and I was one of the unlucky ones. I’d like to take my finance and accounting background and apply it to the non-profit world. Do you know anyone who works for a non-profit who might talk to me about their organization and the world of non-profits generally?”
- “I’ll be job hunting soon, but right now I am at the information-gathering stage. These are the companies I am researching. Do you know anyone who works in these companies that might be willing to help me?”

You aren’t hiding your job searching status, but you aren’t begging for a job either. Trust me, if they know of an appropriate opening, they’ll pass your name along. If they don’t, they’ll help you expand your network.

NETWORKING IS NOT A LINEAR PROCESS: THINK PINBALL

One mistake that people often make when networking is that they focus too much on the “golden contact”; someone who has tons of connections and pull. In reality, the contact that leads to a job often comes from the most unexpected place.

Networking does not go in a straight line. Approach your networking like a game of pinball: your objective is to keep the ball moving and hit as many pins as possible. Quantity of hits, not quality, is what counts. Indeed, you should strive to make 20 NEW contacts each week that you are job hunting. They won’t all be great, but if even 10 percent work out, you have two new leads.

This means that you should ask EVERYBODY that you know, that you meet, that you can think of, for help in your search. Ditzzy Uncle Bob? He may play golf with the CFO of your dream company. The person at that boring cocktail party may be married to someone who has 10 years experience in the field you are interested

in. Everyone has relatives, neighbors, college buddies, church members, tennis partners etc. who are potentially good contacts.

GETTING STARTED

If networking intimidates you, start by making calls to people you feel comfortable talking with. You should eventually be talking to everyone you can. Let them know what you have to offer. Be sure to review your lists of skills and goals so you can articulate your strengths and professional accomplishments. Be prepared to support your claims with specific examples. This preparation will help you present your abilities effectively and will result in a more fruitful networking process.

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU

Be systematic in your approach to networking. When you speak to someone, keep a record of the conversation. Take notes about whatever is said to you. Your contact may toss out company names, suggest job search strategies, tell you they know a friend who is in the same field. Keep track of this information. Use a notebook or develop some other record-keeping system.

Follow up on suggestions and referrals. Many job seekers make their biggest mistake in failing to follow through on leads or to return calls. No matter how good you are at talking to people, it is essential to follow through.

NETWORKING FEEDBACK AND CONTINUATION

Let your contacts know if their leads bring you referrals. Take time to thank them and keep them informed. People always appreciate knowing that their suggestions worked. Your good manners will also make it more likely that your contacts will continue to refer you to their colleagues and friends.

It is also important to keep your network alive. It is natural to focus less on your network once you are employed, but it is prudent to keep in touch with your contacts. You may need to return to these people for more information, so it is a good idea to contact them from time to time--maybe they could use your help.

Adding people you talk to in your job search to your LinkedIn connections is one way to keep in touch. When you do land a job, you can post it to LinkedIn, thanking everyone who helped in your job search, telling them where you have landed and offering anything you can do to help others in your network.

You will also do personal emails to all the people who were helpful in your search, thanking them and letting them know you have landed. Thank you notes, both via LinkedIn and customized, keep your network healthy and growing.

You should also be prepared and willing to give something back to people in your network. Networking is effective because, when done right, both parties benefit. In any case, building and maintaining good relations will ensure that your network will serve you well for a lifetime.