

NETWORKING

WHY SHOULD YOU NETWORK?

Networking yields a range of benefits:

- ♦ You can amass inside information on your targeted industry, company, job, and preferred geographic region;
- ♦ You can learn jargon, technical terms, and buzz-words;
- ♦ You can develop a realistic picture of a chosen career path and the concomitant jobs;
- ♦ You can get support, feedback, and encouragement from others who share your interests;
- ♦ You can increase your access to professional opportunities;
- ♦ You can test your personal marketing skills and tools and your preparation and readiness to approach hiring managers; and
- ♦ You can identify and gain role models and mentors.

WHAT IS A NETWORK?

Your network is an organized system of contacts of family, friends, colleagues, and associates: a chain of information and support. Networking is a powerful tool, exposing you to experts and resources, as well as to leads and referrals for your job-search.

If you approach networking as a fevered quest to amass as many names as you are able to find, so you can ask favors and beg for a job, your endeavors will not be successful. Networking means cultivating relationships by investing personal time and attention to the give-and-take necessary for success.

Networking is two-way: establishing a partnership means that information and helpfulness goes in both directions; being generous and reciprocating courtesies are essential elements of making meaningful connections.

WHO SHOULD BE IN YOUR NETWORK?

Begin your networking list with accessible people whom you already know and with whom you are more relaxed.

Include family, friends, neighbors, community members, classmates and their families, faculty and administration, past and present work associates, former employers and their colleagues, and club members.

Then branch out into the community. Contact alumni, professional, industry, and trade associations, recruiter contacts, headhunters, consultants, and volunteer civic, religious, social, recreational, and political organizations.

Get in touch with people of all ages. Develop a wide-ranging list so you will not rely on any one person for too many requests.

Enlist others to help you brainstorm whom you might contact. Do not underestimate the value of any referral.

WHAT IS APPROPRIATE NETWORKING BEHAVIOR?

Your professional image is important in networking.

Demonstrate a genuine congeniality, polished etiquette, and modest self-confidence.

If you are shy, embarrass easily, or fear rejection, role-play in advance, using practice notes to coach you through the process. You will improve and grow more comfortable with every interaction, and each success will motivate you to continue to develop your networking group.

Learn to ask questions effectively, to listen carefully to responses, to give accurate, relevant information about yourself.

Take offers of help willingly. Do not assume you are being a pest; most people, when contacted, are happy to be helpful and actually enjoy speaking about themselves and what they know.

HOW SHOULD YOU HANDLE YOUR NETWORK CONTACTS?

Develop a networking strategy.

Try a combination of approaches: call someone from your friendly networking list, attend organized gatherings like civic or political groups, join professional associations and volunteer to serve on committees, and, conduct informational interviews.

You network to seek information, advice, and feedback. Always state your specific objectives clearly and ask politely for a short time together. Be prepared to lead the conversation.

Having a hidden agenda will sabotage your attempt to establish a relationship, i.e., if really you want the person to help you get a job but what you ask for is an informational interview, you will damage your credibility

Listen carefully and be willing to hear “no.”

Always keep a detailed record of the content of your communications, noting what you said, to whom, when, where, and what you need to do to follow up.

The more you stay “in the loop” and remain in contact with your growing network, the more likely you will be positioned to hear about hidden opportunities or referred for the job you want.

If you are shy or an introvert, volunteer work or part-time jobs are non-threatening ways to begin networking.

HOW DO YOU ACTUALLY MAKE NETWORKING CONTACTS?

When networking, you may contact individuals face-to-face and by letter, e-mail, and phone.

Choose an approach letter when the precision of your words counts heavily:

- ♦ if the person you are contacting is difficult to reach by schedule or rank; or
- ♦ if you want a referral to someone else in that company who would be your appropriate contact and you need an introduction.

Generally, if you call or write a letter to the Human Resources department in an organization, you may ask for a name of an appropriate person to contact, but under most circumstances that office will not give out names.

Try to make the contact letter, email, or phone call, a “**warm call**” by referring to a mutual acquaintance. And, if possible, relate why you see this contact as a strategic fit in your network.

Remember email for many professionals is a blessing and a curse: many in the workforce use this tool exclusively; however, others feel inundated by the sheer bulk of their mail and respond selectively. In both cases, make sure the subject line of your email is targeted and specific: “John Smith, CFO of ABC suggested I contact you.”

When you contact someone by phone always be prepared:

- ♦ to speak smoothly right away because many professionals answer their own phones;
- ♦ to leave a detailed message on voice mail or with an office assistant and to follow up with another call;
- ♦ and to say, “thank you.”

In your message, speak clearly, repeating your name and phone number slowly at the beginning and end of the message. You might irritate the caller if you mumble or hurry through your words or numbers.

Whether you contact someone with a warm or a cold call, always phone when your energy is high and always use a rehearsed, but natural and practiced script to allay your nervousness and to sound professional. Have your resume and any relevant correspondence or information in front of you.

If you call before nine a.m. or after five p.m., you have the best opportunity to reach your contact directly.

First, offer a personal introduction. At the beginning of the conversation, tell how you got the contact’s name, stating either your referral by name, title, and organization or exactly where you got the contact information.

Ask if this time is OK to continue the conversation. If not, ask for a better time.

If yes, identify your purpose for this phone call:

- are you seeking an appointment?

- do you want information and advice?
- or do you want a job-referral?

Be positive, personable, and considerate of the contact's generosity. Be sensitive to the contact's phone demeanor.

Try to build rapport and arrange a mutually convenient time for a personal meeting, which can be preferable if you want to foster a relationship, or for a longer phone conversation if that is best for the contact.

In actuality, if you speak face-to-face, the experience will be friendlier and will more likely result in additional references, and, perhaps, in offers of assistance.

Indicate that when you do the interview you would like to spend 20-30 minutes-- and then do not go over that limit!

If you leave your own phone number, make sure that your personal answering machine has a professional greeting for the return call or that you have instructed anyone else living in your residence how to answer the phone for your calls.

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH YOUR NETWORK WHEN YOU GET THE JOB YOU WANT?

Don't forget that once you have accepted a job you should contact your references and those who have helped you in your network. You can e-mail or phone most, but write a snail-mail, hand-written note or a professional business letter to those whose rank suggests that route.

You should continue to nurture the give-and-take of your network even after you are settled in your job. Now, you might be in the position to be helpful and informative. Your career is a dynamic, changing adventure, and your network can provide both comfort and growth.