



Flex Your Networking Skills

Networking is essentially relationship building. It's something most of us do in our personal lives – we ask for and give referrals to dentists, hair stylists, and electricians with ease. When it comes to our professional lives, however, we often let our networking skills, and our networks, lapse. Why? Because networking is a lot like exercise – we know it's good for us, we just have so many excuses not to do it.

But just as exercise is critical for a healthy lifestyle, networking is imperative for a healthy career. In fact, some experts estimate more than 60 percent of job seekers find new positions through networking, and most hiring managers fill open posts at their organizations the same way. Of all job search components, networking is the most important part of your campaign for employment. Here are some practical tips for breaking the barriers to networking:

1. Develop a targeted list

The first step in building a network is putting together a list of everyone you know and want to know. Don't assume that just because someone isn't in your industry that they can't be beneficial. Your list should include:

- Family, friends, and neighbors.
- Past and present colleagues, supervisors, and those who reported directly to you.
- Former professors, classmates, and alumni of all colleges, universities, and high schools you attended.
- Vendors, business partners, and salespeople.
- Members of civic, religious, professional, or charitable organizations you belong to or volunteer with.
- Individuals you have interviewed or who have interviewed you.
- Other professionals (accountants, tax specialists, lawyers, doctors, dentists, real estate brokers, clergy, politicians, hair stylists, etc.).
- Recruiters you have worked with.
- Bloggers and members of online forums, groups, and communities.

Go through your current and old contact databases and address books – even holiday card lists – to identify people who might be able to help you. If you are having difficulty finding people you once knew, try using Plaxo or another online address book to update your records.

2. Ask for introductions

Make a list of people you think could influence your job search or provide advice by searching online directories and communities such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Plaxo; and databases such as ZoomInfo, Hoovers, and Yahoo! Finance. Include on your list:

- Executives, hiring managers, and professionals in industries and at companies you have targeted for your job search.
- Recruiters you have not worked with.
- Reporters, media professionals, and authors.
- Local business owners.

Once you have compiled your list, decide who from your existing network can assist you in expanding it, and ask them to make an introduction for you.

3. Prepare multiple messages

The first message you want to prepare is your “30-second elevator speech,” which is a consolidated statement about who you are, what you are looking for, and what makes you unique. You will use this message countless times when networking, so it’s in your best interest to draft one that you can articulate naturally and enthusiastically.

An example might be: “I have spent the past five years as the VP of business development for ABC Manufacturing, overseeing their sales and marketing efforts. I joined them as employee No. 3 when they were just starting up, and was with them throughout their tremendous growth. They were recently purchased by a global consortium and I’m now looking to use my extensive network of relationships and passion for environmental responsibility to help another manufacturing company start and grow their business.”

Once you have your message down, consolidate it into a brief five-to-ten-second version that your network contacts can use when advocating on your behalf: “John is a solid and driven business development professional who used to head-up sales and marketing at ABC. He’s looking for a new opportunity at a manufacturing start-up that is environmentally responsible.”

4. Attend events

Identify professional associations, alumni groups, user groups, civic organizations, or social groups that could benefit you. Find out when and where each of these organizations meets, and join in. Ask colleagues what organizations they belong to, and if you could attend as their guest.

Arrive early, get a copy of the attendee list, study it, and start introducing yourself to those around you. Remember that you all have something in common – an interest in the group that has brought you together.

Also look into alternative organizations such as the Boston Young Professionals Association, or networking groups such as WIND. If you need assistance in identifying organizations that might be of interest, try the Weddle’s Association Directory.

5. Use the power of online social networks

Online networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook are fertile ground for job seekers because of their capacity to easily and exponentially expand your network. Set up or update profiles on these sites to include descriptions of your current and past roles, titles, names of employers, responsibilities, skills, technologies, certifications, awards, and degrees. These are the fields most often searched by hiring companies and recruiters, so it’s imperative to have a detailed profile.

Also investigate and join appropriate LinkedIn and Facebook groups. On your LinkedIn profile, make sure to complete the “Contact Setting” area and check the applicable boxes in the “Interested In” section.

Next, spend some time cleaning up your other online profiles. Many young professionals are on social networking sites like MySpace and YouTube and may have a history of questionable pictures, blogs, and comments that can follow them into the professional realm. Take the time to clean up your online image before seeking out new networking contacts.

Once your profiles are in order, send contact and friend requests to your target list. One of the most exciting components of social networks is the ability to reestablish your relationships. And, once someone is in your LinkedIn or Facebook network, his or her contact list is available to you as well. Tap into this power to expand your network.

6. Overcome shyness

Let’s face it: Outgoing people often have an easier time networking. It’s in their DNA to engage people and start conversations. Networking is often a stressful and intimidating exercise for introverted or shy people, but it needs to be done. To help overcome shyness, develop a list of questions in advance, such as:

- Do you know other companies that might be interested in someone with my background?
- Are there industry associations or strategies I may not have considered?
- Should I learn specific technologies or take classes to better position myself?
- What was the path you took to your current position?
- Are there industry-specific websites I could investigate?
- Are you aware of any companies with openings in my field?
- Can you suggest what other positions might match my skills and background?
- What do you see as the future trends in this industry?
- What skills are employers looking for in this particular industry?
- Can you provide me with three to four names of other people who might be willing to speak with me?

Role-play with a friend or family member until you are comfortable asking these questions, then pick up the phone. By being prepared and by practicing, you should be comfortable enough with your message to overcome your shyness.

7. Watch your behavior

Networking meetings might be shorter and more informal than interviews, but they share decorum. You are asking someone to be your ambassador in the marketplace; you must show them how highly you value their time and attention. Whether meeting face to face or over the phone, always follow these rules:

- Arrive or call on-time.
- Plan for 15-minute meetings, and never exceed a half hour.
- Know when it’s time to exit.
- Wear professional attire and err on the side of being overdressed.
- Pick up the tab, especially if it’s for breakfast or coffee.
- Don’t flirt.
- Don’t smoke in the car beforehand or in front of the person.
- Don’t meet for drinks.
- Eliminate distractions like your cellphone.

8. Set goals

Establish some attainable, concrete networking goals and hold yourself accountable. For example, pledge that you will e-mail three new contacts a day and call one, meet one person face to face per week, spend an hour online each day uncovering new targets and updating your profiles, and attend an event at least every two weeks. With these goals, even if you make contact with only one person a day for month, that's 30 people who might help with your search.

Also, get into a networking frame of mind. No matter where you go or what you do, think about how you can turn that situation into a networking opportunity. When you read an article in a newspaper, pay attention to who wrote it and the experts quoted. At your daughter's track meet, chat with the other parents. When getting a manicure, talk to the other customers about what they do. The world is a web of people connected to each other - take advantage of all those strings.

9. Realize networking is a two-way street

Effective networking relationships are reciprocal. While you may be asking for help now, in the future you will be in a position to offer it. If you think you may be imposing on the person, think about a time when someone asked you for help. You probably weren't angry or rude, you were most likely happy to oblige, even flattered.

There isn't one professional who hasn't had to ask for an introduction, lead, or interview at some point. It is the way of the world – if you give, then you get. And even though you may not currently be employed, there are many ways that you can offer your assistance to others now – and in the future. Offer to make an introduction to someone else in your network. Send links to interesting articles or research that you come across. Or bring someone as a guest to one of your professional association events.

10. Give thanks and keep in contact

E-mail a thank-you note to each person you networked with. This is both a courtesy and an opportunity to stay in touch with someone who may be able to assist you. In the note, reinforce your offer to reciprocate in the future. Follow-up any actions promised (such as providing the name of a doctor or link to an article) in a timely manner.

The most common mistake in networking is letting your efforts lapse. People are best at networking when they need something, but the most effective networkers are those who continually find ways to keep in touch with their contacts. Don't be shy in sending quick bi-annual e-mails to your contacts saying you were thinking about them and hoping they are well. Just make sure the tone is personal and that the e-mails are sent individually (or at least appear that way!).

A strong network can help make introductions and referrals, find new jobs, and help you excel in your current position. But it takes work. Be proactive and don't let your network lapse!

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