

Networking

Executive recruiters and personnel specialists agree that networking is a key ingredient of an effective job search strategy. It also produces the personal referrals that open doors.

Kathy Darby-Young, a personnel professional, got her position at Joseph Pollak through creative networking. Kathy explains, "One day I got a call from a man (Clark) who was networking. He wanted to set up a round table of professionals in the industry to share ideas. I went as did many others. The session was very productive. Anyway, a few months later when I was laid off, I called Clark and asked that we get together. Over breakfast, Clark mentioned he had a friend who was searching for someone just like me. When I got the job, I called Clark back to thank him and we continue to stay in touch every now and then."

In fact, networking is the best method of identifying new opportunities. Why, then, is it that so many jobseekers resist or begrudge the networking process? The answer is *attitude*. Rather than accept that networking is one of many job hunting methods, the jobseeker frequently feels that the process is filled with rejection. This attitude creates resistance. Most of us are uncomfortable calling others asking for work.

Reluctance to ask for help may be human nature. However, in a recent survey on networking, 95% of the professionals who responded said they do not mind receiving such a call. I have to conclude that reluctance to network is just a simple case of "you can take it but you can't dish it out". Usually, you have to ask to get. The people that know this lesson have learned it through experience. Most 'have conquered their negative networking attitude when they finally accept the reciprocity of the process. When people finally give in and begin to ask for help by aggressively networking, they experience the rewards. Real leads are produced and for many, jobs are obtained.

I conquered my negative networking attitude when I finally accepted the reciprocity of the process. The last time I was searching a new opportunity, I reluctantly began the networking process. One call I made was to an old coworker, Steve, whom I occasionally stay in touch with over the years. I remember asking Steve for the names of the three recruiting firms he respected the most. One of the companies Steve referred was McInturff & Associates. After meeting Bob McInturff, I valued the professional interchange and stayed in touch. A year and a half later, when I was laid off, I gave Bob a call. He gave me a job offer and I worked there for almost 8 years.

This story illustrates the power of continual networking. No matter who's making the networking

call or who's receiving the call, there can be potential rewards for both. When someone calls you for help, give it your best shot. When it's your turn to call, realize that it's just the flip side of the same coin called networking.

Often, many people have ulterior motives for assisting you in your networking efforts. Kathleen O'Neill, Human Resource Manager of Bose Corporation explains, "Many key positions are never publicized. A phone call to a decision-maker at the right time could mean the difference between a standard sign-off letter and an interview. Bose Corporation has an excellent Employee Referral Program through which we provide financial rewards to employees who submit the names of qualified candidates who are hired into open positions. Referrals are most frequently family members, previous coworkers or friends from other companies. We have hired some of our best people through this network?"

The first step in the networking process is to build an effective strategy. The basic network strategy utilizes two primary categories of contact development: professional & personal.

The professional network consists of anyone from the direct competition, indirect competition, vendors, customers and companies with technology compatibility, process compatibility and technique compatibility. While the personal network consists of friends, employees, associations, alumni, professional contacts, community contacts, venture capitalists and executive search professionals.

One category at a time, begin with the first category and work your way down the list. Write down everyone you can think of for each category. Do not eliminate anyone. Treat this process like a brainstorming session: the more ideas the better. Go to the library and research. The more names you start with the greater your ability to build a self-sustaining network. Do not judge the value of a name. This is both self-defeating and illogical.

Notice in the Industry Networking List, each category maps a specific strategic area. For instance, the direct competition will be interested in your experience because you know their marketplace. The indirect competition will value your experience because you have worked so closely to their industry. You know their vendors and suppliers better than an outsider. Each category enables you to sell your experience in a unique way that will most effectively meet each potential employer's needs.

Technological compatibility is a strategic area you can apply in many ways. Let's say you know FDA regulations because you have worked in the medical device industry. Contact all the medical companies even if you are not familiar with the product and sell your FDA expertise.

If your expertise is in switches, made primarily through plastic injection molding, you have the opportunity to sell your process expertise by contacting companies that specialize in injection molding. If you have just implemented Just-In-Time, then stress your technique compatibility by identifying companies that want to implement JIT. Your edge on the competition is your proven success having already accomplished the company's current objective.

Each category in the networking list represents a different way to sell your experience; you have multiple avenues to accomplish the same goal: finding a job.

Working the personal network is more easily understood and just as effective. Jim Pearson, a senior manager at EMC found his last two positions through a coworker's referral's referral. It took calling one person he knew and two he did not (the coworker's referral and that referral's referral) to find a job lead. Although Jim's career is settled, he finds networking is an effective professional tool. "Networking, especially at higher levels, typically opens the door to get you a wanted opportunity. I network constantly, whether or not I'm searching for a new opportunity, because it always pays to know the right people. I've found networking through technical associations to be very effective," says Jim.

To truly reap the benefits of networking, keep in mind the old adage: Plan your work and work your plan. Organize the information you gather. Organization is essential, especially when you consider that correct networking results in a continually expanding set of contacts.

To keep your contacts straight, you will need a paper (or computer) trail that records your efforts. Set up a file with categories: one for each month. Each time you make a network call log the results, and then "tickle" the file according to when you want to call the contact again. Cross reference the networking file to a resume log. As you can see, to manage the deluge of information generated from effective networking, preparation and organization are important.

With a strategy in place, you can focus on the mechanics of networking. Most people think that networking means calling and asking for a job. Cancel that thought. The chances that there is a job open for you at the precise moment you call are slim. There are better ways to make the point that you are available.

Think carefully about what information you really want and then ask the right questions to get it. For example, "Do you know of any jobs for me?" will get you a yes or no answer. A Yes answer is great, but a No answer leaves a negative impression.

Ask questions to create success. Always phrase questions so that they generate positive as well as helpful responses. This technique always generates job leads if they are available. For instance, if you are a turnaround specialist, asking "Are any of your competitors in trouble?" will generate useful leads. Asking, "What are the two hottest companies in the industry?" will produce useful information and possibly, generate a real job lead.

It is best to work both professional and personal networks concurrently. Reaching out in various directions will strengthen your network. If you are making new contacts, you will continually create new opportunities for job leads.

The networking process is purely a numbers game. If you start with three names and those three calls refer only one name and that one name produces one more name and that call produces three referrals and those three calls produce three more names, then from the 3 original names, you have been able to reach out to 11 people. Now imagine the network that is created when you start with 100 names.

Some contacts will lead nowhere. It is suppose to work that way. If you keep making new contacts, it is inevitable that you will create a vast network. Since you never know which contact will give you the lead that becomes your job, prejudging the value of your contact is

not relevant. Rather than debating the value of your contact, put your attention on expanding your list of contacts. If you are not generating referrals then either you are not asking the right kinds of questions or you did not start with enough names.

For some, 10 calls will produce results, for others it will take 100; it really doesn't matter how many calls it takes. All that matters is that you get the job you want.

To effectively: network, calling back your contacts is essential. You must stay in touch if you want your contacts to think of you when they hear of a position. In order to keep your networking contacts working for you, (sharing leads whenever they hear of one), you must build and fortify the relationship. One call in six months will not do it. Stay in touch.

Between calls there are a variety of ways to maintain your contacts. For instance, if you see an article of interest or a contact's name in print, clip it and attach a note. You might write: "I'm still searching for that right opportunity in case you hear of anything". Follow-up letters explaining what happened to a lead or a thank you note for a referral or for your contact's time are always well received. Other methods to stay in touch are through association meetings, technical shows and fraternal organizations. E-mail is an effective tool, too. Remember to keep files on all activity. They will be useful the next time you call back.

When you land a job, write to your contacts letting them know. Courtesy and closure go a long way. If you need your network again, you will be talking to these same people. Taking the time to let them know what happened is appreciated and it leaves the door wide open for a future contact.

On the surface, the networking process may seem like a lot of work. But, you meet a lot of people and you learn a lot about other companies. It is a very educational process. And, it might even get you the job you want.

Finally, the best time to network is when you do not need a job. Most successful people diligently build and maintain a large reservoir of contacts. This ensures that when you do need help, your network is already in place. Instead of going in cold the relationships are already solid. A strong network is always a valuable asset.

