

Finding a New Job Is a Matter of Networking

By **Kate Neville**
SPECIAL TO ROLL CALL

Despite the ever-growing dominance of the Internet, sitting behind a desk and submitting your résumé for openings you find online proves not to be the most effective job-search strategy. While applying to online postings may help you feel productive, it turns out that most jobs — particularly exciting and highly sought-after jobs — are never even posted.

As several studies have confirmed, the vast majority of candidates in fact land their next position through “networking.” Though widely used, the term means different things to different people, and often carries negative connotations. Some people are turned off by the image of someone “working a room” and consider it unseemly to “use” people they know to help them get a job. Others see it as a daunting task, and still others appear truly frightened by the prospect.

You may think that networking is inherently awkward and just not for you, or that you’re perfectly happy in your current job, so why bother. Increasingly, however, to advance in almost any career, keeping your head down and doing good work is not enough. The ability to bring in new business proves to be the hallmark of success in a growing number of professions, and networking remains a prerequisite.

Whether you are contemplating an immediate move, it is in your interest to cultivate and maintain professional relationships. While each individual needs to develop a plan that works for him or her, below are some guidelines that can help you reach out and start networking.

Figure Out What ‘Networking’ Means

Despite it being key to career advancement, most colleges and graduate schools (with the notable exception of MBA programs) do not teach students how to network. It is not always clear how to learn such skills once in the work force.

Reflecting what is traditionally understood to be standard practice, gatherings billed as “networking events” typically offer an opportunity to introduce yourself to strangers in a large venue. Very few professionals actually enjoy walking into a room full of people they do not know, handing out cards, indicating that they’re looking for a job, and working to create a good impression within a two- to three-minute conversation.

Luckily, networking encompasses broader alternatives. You can take advantage of numerous opportunities in your current job. Ask to accompany more senior professionals you know to client development meetings so you can see how they are conducted. Attend conferences and industry events on a regular basis to become more comfortable in work-related social interactions. Become involved in volunteer work and in professional associations, such as local committees or alumni groups. Each of these examples “counts” as networking, and you never know when a new position may fall into your lap as a result.

As part of a specific job search, the most targeted and potentially productive networking activity is typically informational interviewing. These types of interviews can take place on the phone, at an event, or over lunch or coffee, but should involve a one-on-one conversation that is scheduled in advance with a specific individual who has something in common with you and knows about your background.

Identify Contacts

When identifying contacts that have the potential to help you with your career, it is

important to cast a broad net. Truly, the neighbor of a friend of a friend’s cousin can make the introduction that leads to your next job.

While many job seekers say they have no contacts, that hardly ever proves to be the case. In addition to social-networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook, valuable sources of contacts and information can include family, friends and neighbors; former colleagues and their friends; fellow alumni of your college or graduate school alma mater; acquaintances with whom you share an interest, such as a book club, soccer league or volunteer committee; and parents at your children’s schools.

The more comfortable you become in informational interviews, the more you typically get out of them. Since these conversations become easier the more you have them, it makes sense to start with people you know fairly well who are your peers or more junior. Even if you have connections that will get you in the door of a high-level decision-maker, save that contact until you have gathered information to concisely articulate what you bring to the table and why a position or type of work is a good fit.

Prepare Knowledgeable Questions and Don’t Ask for a Job

Though busy, most professionals are happy to talk about what they do and to share their perspective on their field. Almost everyone is far more comfortable sharing information than being asked for a job. So long as the meeting goes well, if they know of an opening, they’re going to mention it before the end of the conversation.

For an informational interview to be successful, the person has to consider it a good use of his or her time. You need to prepare questions in advance that show you have researched the market — don’t ask anything you could answer on the Internet — and are aware of relevant issues. Your questions can be broader than those you would ask in a job interview but still need to demonstrate how you can add value to the field. Take the opportunity to verify things you’ve learned from others or seen in your own experience.

At the end of any informational conversation, the most important question to remember is always: “Thank you so much for your time. Is there anyone else you might suggest I speak with to learn more about this type of work?”

Articulate What You’re Looking for and Why

Doing your homework is important. But, such preparation is not sufficient for someone to help you get a job, much less to hire you.

The beauty of informational interviewing is that you both get your name out there and you gather information to decide whether it’s something you want to pursue. When done properly, networking provides an incredibly valuable opportunity to learn about the range of professional roles accessible to someone with your background.

In order to build a credible reputation that makes people want to pass along your name, you need to demonstrate genuine interest in an area and be able to quickly and persuasively answer such basic questions as, “What is it that you’re looking for?” “Why does this area interest you?” and “What experience has prepared you for this type of work?” Failing to answer these questions convincingly is likely to end the conversation sooner than you would like.

Be Fun (or at Least Pleasant) to Spend Time With

Even in the age of technology, prospec-

tive employers — and people who refer you to them — still want to meet you in person and evaluate how you interact professionally. You will most likely spend a great deal of time with your colleagues, and your networking contacts do not want to hurt their own reputations by referring someone who proves to be difficult in the workplace or behaves inappropriately in professional settings.

Beyond having the skills necessary to do a job, being fun to hang out with — or at least pleasant to be around — makes you that much more attractive as a candidate. Many who make the effort to network find the process to in fact be enjoyable — meeting with professionals who share your interests can lead to fascinating discussions.

Becoming engaged in friendly conversation can be a huge advantage in networking, but it is important not to lose sight of either the context or the goal. Remember that you are being evaluated as a potential colleague. Basic courtesy goes a long way. Put yourself in their position and be respectful of people’s time. Be deferential rather than a know-it-all. Thank them after the fact and follow up on their suggestions.

Realize It Will Likely Take Longer Than You Expect

Employers routinely take far longer to fill positions than seems reasonable to candidates, and networking takes time. Even in a strong economy, a job search can take from six months to a year and often longer. No matter how frustrated you become during this time, you obviously want to avoid coming across as trying too hard — or, worse,

desperate — as you network to find a job you want.

Particularly after you’ve invested the time and effort to network, apply and interview, it is important to “get back out there” with a good attitude. It can help to remember that in retrospect many professionals describe not being hired into a particular position as a “blessing in disguise.” Take a deep breath and don’t panic.


Of course, you may have to take a position temporarily in order to pay the bills. So long as you don’t take out your frustration on people in a position to help you, doing so doesn’t bar you from eventually getting the job you want — it is not uncommon to have to work in a position as a “stepping stone” to the path you want to take.

Leverage the Contacts You Make

Regardless of your career path, it behooves you to remain acutely aware of the need to develop networks and to seek out and take advantage of every opportunity to gain such skills. Over time, networking not only can help you land your next job, plan your career path, and lead to future clients, but can eventually put you in touch with contacts you want to hire as you become more senior.

Don’t let the results of your networking efforts fall apart. Keep in touch with people who gave you information during a job search. Let them know where you land, and once you’re settled, be sure to agree to meet with future candidates who contact you to request an informational interview.

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