

Networking for Success!

Networking can be very helpful to your career. The idea is to develop a network of friendly people who share information to help each other. It is best known as a strategy for opening the hidden job market, for getting a good job. Since many jobs (some would say most) are not advertised, it is essential that you develop friendly relationships with people who can tip you off to job openings -- perhaps even introduce you to the person who is doing the hiring. There is some truth in, "It's not what you know, but who you know."

Networking has other benefits. You are creating a community of people who support each other, who provide emotional support and information that will help each other. You will learn of new developments in your field: new tools, processes, leaders, training programs, products and services. You may discover the solution to a problem you face at work. And, you may have the satisfaction of providing the key piece of information that makes a real difference in the life of one of those in your network.

Networking is a planned, and ongoing effort. You set goals, develop strategies for achieving them, take action, evaluate how well your plan is working, and make changes as necessary. It is something that you do throughout your career.

To build an effective network, you need both formal and informal networks in place. Formal networks are the type you actually join, usually with dues and regular meetings. These could include a professional association, a group like the Lion's Club, or an association of school graduates. Informal networks may include friends you run into at an annual holiday party, friends you keep up with from a former job, people from your church, mosque, or synagogue, or the people you met while white-water rafting. A good network contains both types and has a healthy mix of both business and social conditions.

Here are five steps for building your network:

What is networking?

Have you ever asked a friend for information about something? Have you invited someone out for lunch or a coffee? Have you ever helped out a friend? If you have, then you already know how to network.

Networking is about making connections with people, then building and maintaining these relationships. You already have a network of family and friends, and so you already have skills in networking. Each person in your network can also draw upon their own network of personal and professional relationships.

Who's in your network?

Your existing network might include the following people:

- relatives
- friends
- friends of relatives
- friends of friends
- fellow students
- lecturers
- current employers
- past employers
- fellow workers
- professional associations
- extra-curricular associates and so on

Who else is in your network? As you start to make use of your network, it will develop and expand to include more people.

Networking for work

When you're looking for work, you need to draw on the people in your network in a more conscious and systematic way.

You might find that some people in your existing network have useful advice or information for you while you're looking for a job. Or they might lead you to someone in their network who can help you. Be clear about the information you are looking for, so that your contacts can help you or refer you on to someone else.

It's a good idea to record the name of each contact and the information they have given you, as you network. This will help you to organize and make the best use of the large amounts of information you are collecting. More importantly, it will allow you to thank your contacts for helping you along your career path.

Plan Network

Begin by writing out your goals for your network. What do you hope to achieve? Information about job openings? Get ideas about how you might improve

yourself? Advance your career? Learn about new developments in the field?
Training opportunities? Emotional support?

Write down how you might help the people in your network. Networking is about sharing. Even if you are just starting your career, you will have something to share. It may be as simple as your friendship and sending a card. You may come across an article you can copy and share. As your network grows and you know the people in it better, you will see ways that people in it might link together, help each other.

Make Contact

Write down the kinds of people you want in your network: such as, their background, position, personality, leisure interests, and values. Remember, you want people who will help you reach your goals, the goals you wrote down earlier.

Make a list of the people you already know who you want to include in your network . . . and then a list of other possibilities. Consider how you will contact people you would like to include in your network, such as, in person, by phone, email, chat rooms, online discussion groups, or other groups.

Learn about information interviewing . . . meeting face-to-face with a worker in an occupation that interests you. This powerful technique is primarily used for learning about occupations and searching for jobs. It is also an excellent way to build your network.

Keep your network to a manageable size. Start off small and work up to a size that works for you.

Organize Your Network

All your contacts won't do you any good unless you organize them. Think about how all this information will be most helpful to you. There are many computer programs that can be used for this purpose. Or, a simple way to do this is to use a multiple-rolodex system. The one on top of your desk is for current, frequently used contacts. A second business-card file is for people you want access to, but know you won't be speaking with more often than once or twice a year. An optional third file can be for the "old-timers", people you haven't contacted in a year or more.

You can also organize your network on color-coded or alphabetized index cards, categorizing your contacts and keeping track of the calls you make to each. Give your network a checkout at least once a year. Weed out and reorganize your card files, rolodexes, and address books. Keep your list of current and active contacts close at hand.

Set a timetable to achieve your goals; perhaps you can aim for one cold call, one lunch, and two reconnecting calls a week. Create a file or "networking" notebook to record who you've called and what the outcome or response was. Stick to your schedule and, to stay on track, read over your responses from time to time. You'll be surprised and encouraged by how many contacts you are making.

It helps to set aside a special networking time, such as 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Thursdays, if your work schedule allows. Quiet Sunday evenings at home can be good times for networking, often the only way to make long-distant contacts. If you put yourself on a mental schedule, you're more likely to really make contacts. When attending meetings, set goals to meet a certain number of new people or leave with a certain number of business cards. Then do it!

Networking is a challenge. The biggest part of it is psychological -- getting and keeping motivated . . . and overcoming any fears you may have. Keep in mind that "It can't hurt to ask" . . . that most people enjoy being asked for help and are flattered to be asked for advice. They also know that in this uncertain job world, they need to network. Always push yourself. Approach new people at meetings and start a conversation, even if you're not in the mood. Taking the initiative really pays off. Whether you're a novice or an expert, you get only as much out of networking as you put into it.

Practice Networking Etiquette

The last, but possibly the most important tool for good networking is to make sure you observe networking etiquette. Here are a few essentials to remember:

- Always respect your contact's names. Get an OK before you use a person's name as a referral to get to someone else.
- Make sure you call people at times that are convenient for them. Don't wake someone at midnight just to "touch base."
- Follow through on your promises. If someone asks for a copy of an article you've mentioned, jot that request on the back of her or his business card and send the article within the week. If you offer to give someone a phone number, make sure you send it. Even if you haven't made specific commitments to your contacts, communicate with them to stay visible. Send them cards at holiday time, ask them to lunch "for no reason at all," clip articles you know they would appreciate and send them with your card. Think of creative ways to keep in touch.
- Thank everyone who helps you or provides you with leads. At any given meeting, you're bound to come away with at least three ideas or tips. Thank the people who offered them with a one-minute phone call or brief handwritten note. It's wise to thank people for leads and ideas even if their suggestions don't pan out; your contacts will appreciate the follow-up.
- Network before you graduate to build relationships and build opportunities for career success.