

Networking and Information Interviewing

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THE MAJORITY OF job seekers find their job by networking. It's hard to believe that with thousands of jobs posted to online job boards worldwide, there are even more jobs available by networking. Strange, but true.

For business professionals seeking senior management and executive-level jobs, it's even truer. You rarely see a job posting for a CEO, President, or Vice President position. Executives as well as executive recruiters primarily rely on networking. There is truth to the adage, "It's not just what you know, but who you know."

NETWORKING—IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK IT IS

To be an effective networker, you don't need to be extroverted and ready to schmooze with anyone. You don't have to make hundreds of cold calls. You don't have to get people to do something for you that they really don't want to do. You don't need to have every person you know in a customized database. And you don't have to know lots of people. Networking is simply the process of getting to know people who have the potential to help you (and for you to help them)—ONE PERSON AT A TIME.

Networking is useful in a variety of environments, but for this article we will focus on how to use networking in the job search process.

The two primary components of networking in the job search are gathering information and re-

lationship building. Gathering information enables you to gain knowledge so that you can make sound, informed decisions. Building relationships enables you to develop supporters who can assist you now and in the future. By focusing on just one person at a time, networking is accessible to anyone.

The ultimate goal of networking is to gather relevant information and build relationships to support your ultimate objective of securing a great job.

NETWORK WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE

One misconception about networking is that job seekers believe that they should connect with the highest level person in an organization, because s/he is the ultimate decision-maker. In the job search, start networking by gathering information from people who can give you "insider" information. This will help you determine your interest level in the job and company, and also prepare you for future conversations with others higher in the organization, including formal interviews.

Resist the temptation to shorten the networking process by going directly to the decision-maker. As you go higher up the ladder, the stakes increase because your informal networking conversation can quickly turn into an actual interview—which can be disastrous if you're not prepared.

Start with friendly contacts—people who are most likely to answer your request for a meeting. To in-

crease your chances of a positive response, try one of the following approaches:

Get a referral from someone who thinks highly of you.

Research to see if you share a common affinity (e.g., went to the same school, played same sport, etc.) or interest.

Determine if you have information, knowledge, or perspective that would be of interest (e.g., industry trends, customer insight, market analysis, work or academic experience, etc.).

Find the common link and communicate it in your request to meet. By creating intrigue with your target contact, s/he will be motivated to meet with you to learn more.

DON'T SEND YOUR RESUME

The number one mistake in networking is attaching your resume when making a meeting request. Your resume sends the message, "I am looking for a job." Even though that statement might be true, it diminishes your ability to obtain networking meetings.

Most contacts want to be helpful. Most don't have job openings, so when a resume is included, they are likely to reply, "I don't have a job, but I'll pass your resume to our HR department."

If you are changing careers, or if you don't have the

strongest resume, or if your background doesn't match the profile of the organization's typical candidate, your resume becomes a potential barrier. Bring your resume to the meeting after you have developed a connection with your target contact.

Instead, when making a meeting request give your contact a one- to two-sentence description of your relevant experience and your interest in the job and company. Your sole objective is to set up a meeting, so provide just enough information to make that happen. Too much information can sabotage your plans.

THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

To make the most of your meeting, plan on conducting an informational interview. The informational interview is not a job interview. It's an opportunity for you to quickly learn and gain important information.

The key objectives of the informational interview are:

To develop a positive connection with your contact.

To gain insight into a career path, a company, and an industry.

To get advice regarding how you can get a job at this company.

To obtain additional contacts.

To make the most of an informational interview, visit your contact in person at his/her work environment. As you think about your upcoming meeting, develop a mindset with the following thoughts: "This meeting is not about me. It's not a

job interview. It's a valuable opportunity for me to learn about this person, his/her job, this company, and perhaps this industry. This person may be the conduit to my dream job, so I must prepare and present myself professionally."

Develop a strong introduction, an agenda with specific time allocations for each item, and specific questions that you intend to ask. Be very focused, as you won't have an unlimited amount of time.

Don't ask questions that you can easily find the answers elsewhere (e.g., company website, Google, friends). Be careful asking questions that are general ("Tell me about marketing"). Instead, reframe it as a personal question (see below).

You are running the meeting/interview, so plan on listening for at least 70 percent of the conversation.

The informational interview framework can be structured like this:

INTRODUCTION

My background and interest in your job/career and company/industry. Goals of meeting. Confirm time available. Determine when to talk about information you have to share. Share common interests.

EXPERIENCE

Tell me about your background. What are the core components of your job? What do you like/dislike? What do you like about working for this organization? In this industry?

PERSPECTIVE

What careers do people pursue from this job? What might you do? What knowledge, skills, and experiences are required for this job? What's the hiring and interview process?

ADVICE

Given my background, what do I need to do if I really want this job? Given my resume, how should I tailor it to fit the job?

REFERRALS

Do you know anyone doing similar work? Would you mind asking them to meet with me?

THANK YOU

End meeting on time. (You can ask for a future meeting/call or email exchange.) Please let me know if I can be of help to you anytime.

FINAL THOUGHTS

After your meeting, always send an email thank you note. A written thank you is a nice personal touch.

With some of your contacts, you may wish to develop an ongoing relationship. Send news or information when you read or find information that may be of interest to your contact. Make sure to close the loop with this contact when you've made contact with their referrals and when you've concluded your job search.

If you decide that you wish to pursue a job at this company, follow the advice given. Ask your contact for a referral to the hiring manager, in addition to applying via the standard process. If there is no job available, meet with your target contact

to determine if there are any needs for project work or contract work. You will likely need to be proactive at suggesting that option.

Remember, networking is simply the process of getting to know people who have the potential to help you (and for you to help them)—ONE PERSON AT A TIME. Meet just one person this week

and you'll quickly find out how easy and valuable networking really is. 📌