

What is Networking?

Networking is a reciprocal process based on the exchange of ideas, advice, referrals, leads and contacts. It is a social activity in which the main mechanism is simply chatting with people. Most of us do a natural "hit or miss" type of networking everyday as we share and exchange information with our friends. To turn this form of networking into a really valuable resource, we must learn how to "systematize" our existing network and expand it. Systematic networking, is a planned and structured campaign that starts with friends, acquaintances, and relatives and moves towards meeting with all kinds of new people that have information you would like to have. If you are doing a job search, you need to take some time and learn how to systematically build a personal network that will work for you.

Why is Networking Important?

In today's tough job market you need all the help you can get to find a job. Since only one third of today's jobs are advertised by conventional methods, the key is knowing how to access the "hidden job market" that makes up the other two thirds. Studies have indicated that as many as 75% of all positions are filled by some kind of informal hiring. Companies have long relied on word-of-mouth advertising, information from friends and acquaintances, and behind-the-scenes favors when seeking to fill openings. Why? These methods have proven time and again they save valuable time and money and yield satisfying results. Knowing how to build your personal networking system and understanding how to make it work for you is the critical skill that will enable you to put yourself in the right place at the right time to get the job you want. The objectives of networking include:

- Letting people know you are available for hire.
- Discovering jobs in the hidden job market.
- Communicating with a wide variety of people
- Increasing your general company and industry knowledge.
- Impressing professionals who might be in a position to hire you.

What are the Keys to Networking Success?

Systematic networking is a difficult and complicated process that takes effort and time investment. The rewards, however, are unmatched. Keep these points in mind when networking:

- **Everyone is a potential contact.** The more people you come into contact with, the higher the probability of success.
- **Expect rejection.** Everyone experiences some amount of rejection so be prepared for your share.
- **Keep it low pressure.** Your approach has to be subtle, honest, professional, and with a willing to reciprocate.
- **You need a plan.** Your success will be directly related to your ability to develop and follow a targeted plan.

How Can I Create My Own Network?

Without knowing it, you have been making contacts and building your personal network your whole life. Everyone you have ever known is a potential contact that could lead you to a job offer. Here are five steps you can follow to systematize and expand your already existing network

Step One - Self-Assessment. Before starting your job search, decide what direction you want to take. What types of jobs are you interested in? What qualifications do you have?

Step Two - Brainstorming. Identify your current networking contacts. Your basic network may include:

- Friends
- Faculty

- Acquaintances
- Supervisor
- Immediate family
- Fellow workers
- Distant relatives
- Career Services staff
- Advisor
- Significant other
- Doctor
- Minister

Extend your list to include anyone else you can think of. You never know who might be able to give you a good lead so don't count anyone out.

Step Three - Make a "Hot" List. After making your list of possible contacts, put the people in a manageable order. People that are closest to your field of interest should be at the top of the list. These people and other key contacts comprise your "hot" list. Your first goal will be to start building relationships with these people.

Step Four - Make Contact. It is time to open the lines of communication. Remember you can make contacts anywhere. You can make contacts in person through organizations, job fairs and interactions with faculty. Membership in professional organizations can also help you make many contacts within your field. College campuses are great places to meet professionals and start building a network.

If you are trying to make contact with someone you have never met before and who you have no professional ties to, you have a couple of options. Your initial contact can be made by phone or by letter. You will have to decide which method will work best for you for each networking contact.

Communication by phone is more direct and sometimes more effective than a letter. The down side is that you may have to try several times before you can reach the person. Keep the following in mind:

- Know what you want and be able to communicate it.
- Have a written self-introduction in case you get nervous and tongue-tied.
- Ask if you can forward a copy of your resume. This enables your contact to become more familiar with your background and job qualifications.
- Remember your contacts are busy people so keep the conversation brief.
- Always ask for a referral to other professionals in your field. This expands and strengthens your network.

Writing a letter to possible contacts allows you to craft your words more carefully. Communicating by letter often works well if you have been unsuccessful in reaching the contact by phone. Some tips for letter writing:

- Keep your letters short. Convey your needs and goals succinctly.
- Start with a brief introduction. Indicate how and why you chose to contact them.
- Briefly mention your background and future goals.
- State how the contact can be of help to you.
- Indicate that you will follow up with a phone call in a specified amount of time.
- Always provide your phone number so you can be contacted.

Step Five - Maintain Communication. Keep talking to your contacts so you can stay informed.

Some other key networking tips to remember include:

- **Stay organized.** You can't be effective if you forget things.

- **Be willing to reciprocate.** If your contacts need help with something , offer yourself as an aid. Never forget that networking is a two-way reciprocal process.
- **Keep adding contacts.** Always be trying to expand your network to make it stronger.
- **Always send thank-you letters.** This shows you value the contact and the help that has been provided.

Remember, the closest thing to knowing something is to know where it is and how to find it. Networking for any type of advice, information or personal referrals is a time saving technique for finding exactly what you are looking for. To be effective it must be done in a true spirit of sharing. It is about requesting and offering, receiving and giving, accepting support and giving support.