

Networking to Land Your Dream Job

By Helene Lauer

In this age of increasingly short-term job cycles, networking is an essential skill for managing your career. Many people think that networking is simply a euphemism for asking for a job—nothing could be further from the truth. If you are truly networking, you are building resources, acquiring information, and offering assistance to others all at the same time. Unfortunately, networking is not an instinctive skill. This guide will help you start networking your way to your dream job.

What is networking?

Networking is the art of building relationships for the purpose of acquiring and disseminating information; it can be done informally and naturally every time you interact with another professional. When you network, your objective is to learn about the other individual and to seek their advice on your project. In the case of job searches, the project is about locating resources—including individuals—that will help you learn about the job market specific to your particular expertise and interests. It's a good idea to network while you are still happy or moderately happy with your job. Once you've established a professional network, you can more easily expand on and give focus to this process when the need arises.

Getting started

Some of the best networking can be simply talking to people you know well. If you are new at networking and are just beginning career research or a job search, begin by making a broad list of people you know—even those people you hadn't thought of as network contacts. Your list should include friends, relatives, work colleagues (past and present), and service providers such as your accountant, physicians, and others with whom you do business on a personal basis. Also include neighbors, club members, teachers and professors, alumni contacts, social and community contacts, and local merchants. Informal discussions with these various individuals can often lead to more helpful, formal networking contacts.

Be prepared to discuss your career background even with people who know you well. You'd be surprised how little others may know about your work accomplishments. You can also start networking by joining a professional association. Gales Directory of Business and Professional Associations—located in the reference section of your local library—can help you identify the organization(s) most appropriate for you. Web sites such as the Internet Public Library's page can also help you find professional associations and contacts.

Setting up a meeting

Once you've made the transition from informal to more formal contacts, assess whether it is better to call or write to request a meeting based on the nature of your relationship with that individual. In some cases, you may want to do both—send a letter or an e-mail message, then follow up with a phone call. Whatever the medium, you can set the tone for the meeting and provide your contact with some general background if you include the following points:

- * Opening lines that express interest in this person and a reference to the last time you met
- * A brief update on your professional status
- * A statement about your interest in investigating a new career direction
- * A request to discuss these ideas and obtain some advice on your endeavor

Asking the right questions

The questions you ask depend on the nature of your career investigation and the person with whom you are networking. You

- * The key skills and core competencies that employers are looking for in the field
- * The hottest sectors of the job market for this type of work
- * Three to five of the most important issues currently being addressed in the field
- * The professional resources used by the movers and shakers in the field
- * Changes that could impact the field and industry
- * How to gain field or industry status and recognition

might want to pose questions that relate to the following:

Organizing your networking activities

If you are networking while currently employed, you might want to set a goal of five networking conversations per month. These could occur in person or over the phone. If you are actively job-hunting, you should aim at having several networking conversations per week.

Very quickly you'll find that you need a tracking system to record names of initial contacts, referrals obtained from those contacts, e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and mailing addresses. You'll also want to note the source for each referral, dates when you've made contact, and any follow-up conversations you plan to have with that individual.