

NETWORKING

What is it and how to do it

*Prepared by The University of St. Thomas Career Counseling Services
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What is networking?

Networking at its essence, is the art of creating, building and maintaining alliances. It is an organized and purposeful approach to gathering information, identifying contacts, obtaining referrals and exchanging information and ideas with other people. Networking is not contacting everyone that you know and asking them if they know of any job openings. It is a reciprocal process that is as much about what you can offer to others as what they can offer you. It is a set of skills that you can develop and utilize to learn more fully about your options and opportunities.

How can networking be helpful?

Let's say that you have decided to make a change in your career, or you find that you are at a crossroads, having to shift or change the focus of your career. You are a little unsure on how you can implement the transition. Or maybe, you have outgrown your current position, have recently completed your degree and are now eager to put that knowledge to use. You could have been a casualty of downsizing or layoffs. Or maybe you are moving to a different geographical location.

Whatever the reason, you find yourself in a transition period and wondering what the next move might be. You are being faced with questions like:

- How do I let others know that I am in the market for a new position?
- Where should I begin my search?
- Who do I need to talk too?
- How can I use my time most effectively?
- Where should I concentrate my energy to realize my goals?

Transition periods occur during the course of every individual's life and career. These periods bring many questions like those above, and cause us to examine our lives and our choices. These periods also offer us the opportunity to realize change in our life and career. Developing and utilizing your networking skills can be a critical part of this transition process. Networking skills can help you identify and realize questions, needs and opportunities that you have. Using your network can also help to clarify what industries, fields and positions are available and currently in demand. They can also help put you into contact with the right people and may ultimately have an impact on landing your dream job.

What Can a Network Offer?

- Networking can help to expand your options by introducing the opportunity to speak with people who are directly involved with your interest areas or who know people who are.
- Networking is a process that enables you to gain relevant information about the culture of an organization, the trends in the market, and what the hot topics in a particular field may be.
- Networking offers you the opportunity to gather first-hand information and to consider things from the perspectives of those who are currently in your field of interest. This information and knowledge can help you further clarify your interests and put your transition into motion.
- Networking can also help you uncover hidden jobs or even help you to create a new position for yourself. It has been said that over 80% of jobs don't ever get advertised. Then you might ask, how do you find out where they are? This is where your networking skills come into play. It's not only *what* you know, but also *whom* you know and *how* you present that knowledge and experience.

You can benefit from:

- Information
- Skill-building
- Contacts
- Referrals
- Feedback
- Support
- Advice

Who is in Your Network?

Your network can consist of many different people, with new individuals being added from all walks of life. Anyone with whom you have come into contact could be incorporated. Examine all the relationships that you have with others professionally, personally, educationally, even familial. Do not limit yourself to only the relationships you have at this time, but reflect on those in your past as well. Your network is a fluid entity, with you having a flexible, continuous and reciprocal role with each of the members of your network.

One of the easiest and usually least painful places to begin developing your network, is by talking to your immediate family and friends. Let the people who you are comfortable with and who know you best be your starting point and expand

your network out from there. Start by asking them about your field of interest, brainstorm with them as to anyone they know who could help your search and from there, expand outward to former co-workers, business associates, professors, classmates, members of volunteer organizations, your barber and your mechanic. Anyone and everyone you come into contact with can be a source of rich information.

Caution: You need to be conscious of whom you are speaking with and how reliable the information may be. Ask yourself, how do I view this person? How might others view them? What information am I receiving and how will it be used?

Ultimately, how will having your name associated with this contact reflect on your and the impression you make to your potential professional colleagues and employers?

Offering your time, knowledge and experience to others is not only a way of giving back to your community, it can also be a great way for you to network. It is a golden opportunity to meet and develop new relationships with individuals from many diverse fields and occupations. It is an opportunity to gain professional experience as well as demonstrate your skills. By volunteering, you are not only helping others and contributing to a worthy cause, but you are expanding your networking possibilities and adding new skills and experience. Besides, you will most likely feel good about giving back, have fun and meet many new people in the process.

How to Utilize Your Network

Another important step in fully utilizing your network is, being specific about what you are looking for. Be able to clearly articulate what that is to others. Identify and state clearly and specifically what it is you are hoping to gain; i.e., information, contacts, referrals, etc. Being specific and clear about what it is you are looking for helps you get what you really want from this process and it makes the networking process move smoothly and is ultimately more helpful and successful for everyone involved. Again, a good networking relationship is one that is reciprocal in nature and beneficial to each individual involved.

How Do You Begin?

Work to present your questions in an open-ended format, work to get the other person talking and expand the conversation from there. Be positive and have a good attitude. Be organized; keep careful records of whom you have talked with, what the conversation was about, when you spoke with them and when you will

follow up with that person. Remember, don't ask for a job, ask for information. Work to maintain a continuing dialogue and connection with your contacts.

Develop a list of "target" companies/organizations that interest you and that you would enjoy working with. Become knowledgeable about those organizations, what they do, who they work with and what the trends are in their markets. This is an opportunity for you to show that you are up to speed with their organization and their market and that you could be brought on board with little work on their end. Create a list of goals and be able to specifically articulate your goals. Say thank you to those who have helped you along the way. Offer your help to others in your network.

Possible Questions to Ask When Networking

- Who else do you think I should speak to about this subject?
- Where would you suggest I look for further information on this subject?
- Could I use your name as a reference or a point of contact in the future?
- Could I contact you with further questions?
- Where do you see this field going in the near future?
- What do you enjoy most about your career, organization, field, etc.?

Reciprocal Nature of Networking

Another important consideration is the reciprocal nature of the networking process. Developing strong networking skills involves more than just asking others for information and help, it also means being willing and able to give that help back to others. Networking means keeping those within your network current on what is going on with you, but also asking what is going on with them. It means being open to sharing information, replaying upcoming events and offering helpful feedback to others.

Networking involves updating others on your progress or lack of progress, sharing what has been helpful to you and what might be helpful to others. It is a process of give and take. Work for others, be present for them, share what you know and your experience with them and they will do the same in return for you.

Remember to say *thank you!* Be sure you acknowledge those who have helped you along the way. Also remember that kind words can go a long way, especially a thank you. Always be polite and recognize the time and consideration that others within your network have offered to you and repay the favor.

Opportunities for Networking

- Attend professional or trade association meetings
- Talk to other parents when attending your child's school or sporting events
- Volunteer for community projects
- Visit with other members of your social organizations or religious groups
- Talk to your neighbors
- Start up a conversation with someone else waiting at the bus stop or in line for coffee
- Post messages on mailing lists or in internet chat rooms
- Talk to salespeople who are visiting your office

How Do You Rate With Your Networking Skills?

1= Never 2= Sometimes 3= Regularly 4= Often 5= Always

- Do you take the initiative and introduce yourself to others?
- Are you clear about the job you want and the direction you want to go with your career?
- Do you keep in touch with your contacts and keep them current with your progress?
- Do you have a defined list of companies/organizations that you are interested in working for?
- Are you involved with professional associations, organizations, clubs or groups?
- Do you project a positive outlook?
- Are you professional and respectful when you interact with people?
- Do you keep your appointments with people and follow up with thank you notes?
- Are you clear and concise with the way you introduce yourself to others?
- Do you challenge yourself to meet and acknowledge new and different people daily?
- Do you conduct research about the industry and company/organization that you would like to work in?
- Do you develop and ask well-thought-out questions?
- Do you routinely ask the people you meet for two or three people to get into contact with?
- Do you come to meetings prepared and with an open mind?
- Do you reciprocate with your networking contacts?