

Networking Basics:

Tapping the Hidden Job Market



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Explore. Experience. Engage.

What is 'Networking'?

Networking is the process of gathering helpful information from a network of contacts to assist you in planning your career and in looking for internships and jobs (MonsterTRAK.com, 2001). It's a process of building relationships from which you enlist support and ask for ideas, advice and referrals to those with hiring power (Hansen 2000). Sharing information with your contacts in return is essential to building mutually beneficial relationships. Make sure you know yourself and what you have to offer (e.g. greatest accomplishments, personal and professional interests, career-related values). Networking can be thought of as two stages:

Developmental: Networking with first-tier contacts for the purpose of getting further contacts and referrals

Strategic: Direct networking with second-tier contacts that lays the foundation for hiring

Why Network?

Based on a US Department of Labor survey, almost 50% of job seekers secured positions from referrals from friends or relatives (otherwise known as networking!) (Hansen 2000). We know that a vast majority of job vacancies are never posted. Employers are often reluctant to advertise positions directly because of cost (of advertising and of staff time to look through the mountains of applications generated by direct postings) and because they believe word-of-mouth referrals lead to the best candidates in the most efficient manner. In addition, networking may uncover job opportunities before they actually exist, due to the length of time necessary to conceptualize, craft and advertise position descriptions formally. Networking is especially useful in highly competitive industries, in fields where full-scale recruiting is cost-prohibitive (e.g. non-profits) and for less obvious occupations (e.g. not teaching, engineering, law, medicine, business management). Networking serves several purposes; be sure to clarify for yourself *why* you are contacting a particular individual before doing so. Reasons include:

- Focusing your choice of major or career direction
- Validating your choice of career
- Getting advice about your job search
- Refining your interviewing skills
- Uncovering specific employer information or job leads

How Do I Make Contact?

Making contact can take place several ways:

In person: Usually when first looking for referrals and leads among the people you already know well; later when meeting face-to-face with contacts you've developed through referrals, after an interim step in which you call, write or email those individuals.

Mail: Usually best when contacting someone to whom you've been referred but don't know well or when making a "cold" contact; introduces you less intrusively than via phone, but must be followed up by a phone call (don't place the burden of correspondence on your new contact); should be concise and well-written.

Email: A good choice when you know the contact or when you know the organizational culture is oriented toward email; more immediate than a letter but still less intrusive than a phone call; should also be well-written, concise and followed up by a phone call to your contact.

Phone: Essential tool of networking – most paths ultimately lead to phone conversations; practice your technique with scripts, friends and tape recorders if you're nervous.

Start slowly: Force yourself to chat with people you don't know in elevators, in line at the store, just about anywhere. Set a goal to talk to at least two people you don't know at the next party or event you attend.

Flattery will get you everywhere: Make a list of people you admire. Write each of them a letter or email expressing your interest in their work. You might be surprised what happens! Start a conversation with a genuine compliment (don't pick something too obvious, like a man's tie). Be nice and respectful to all administrative staff. These are the people who get you in to see the person you want to meet in the future.

Who Should Be Part of My Network?

Your first tier of contacts doesn't necessarily contain individuals who will lead directly to a job. Rather, the initial, **developmental networking** process involves contacting readily available people you may already know:

- Classmates
- Alumni (especially recent grads)
- Parents and other family
- Parents of classmates and friends
- Faculty and staff (including Career Services)
- Current and former employers
- Guest speakers, campus recruiters and job fair reps
- Members of professional associations
- Members of student organizations to which you belong
- Internet on-line discussion groups, chat rooms, etc.
- Anyone else you know (e.g. high school teachers, family doctors, clergy, coaches, etc.)

Your first-tier contacts may lead to a hiring opportunity, but most likely will garner referrals to second-tier contacts that are more closely involved with your targeted industry, field or position. Be sure to keep your first-tier contacts informed of your progress and send thank-you notes!

When you get referrals to these second-tier contacts who are closer to your target, **strategic networking** begins, laying the foundation for possible hiring. These are the contacts with whom you will have more in-depth discussions about your career development, get advice and job leads and possibly interview for a position. Practice your "sound bite" (brief introduction) and "commercial" (longer introduction) before initiating contact through phone, mail, email or in person.

Where Can I Network?

You can network everywhere you go, especially wherever people gather, but the following locations work best for successful networkers, (Hansen 2000):

- Professional organizations
- Volunteer organizations
- Charity and fundraising events
- Civic and community groups
- Religious communities
- Golf course, tennis/racquetball court, health club
- Political campaign events
- Chamber of commerce
- Your hometown
- Airplanes
- Your dream organization's favorite hangout (e.g. bar)
- Toastmasters
- Weddings
- Cocktail parties
- Convention and trade shows
- Book clubs
- Continuing education programs
- Alumni associations, reunions and networks
- Newspaper business section
- Internet

Networking Etiquette

People don't mind being "used" but don't want to be taken for granted (Hansen 2000). Be sure to:

Know your purpose for networking: Don't waste contacts' time by being unsure of how you want them to help.

Do your homework: Be prepared to ask questions that can't easily be found through a little research.

Don't act desperate: Be positive and upbeat. Smile and have fun. Fear and negativity are turn-offs to contacts.

Reciprocate: Offer help to your contacts and supply needed information whenever possible. Follow through!

Be interesting to others: Stand out by the quality of your questions, the confidence in your handshake/posture/eye contact or the fact you've done your research and it shows.

Listen: Don't monopolize or rush the conversation, but contribute when appropriate. Use active listening skills (lean forward, lift eyebrows, nod, "um-hmm," etc.).

Respect your contacts' time: Remember time zone differences, be brief and to the point and always ask if a contact has time to visit with you.

Get permission and give credit when sharing a referral's source.

Be careful using the word "networking": The overuse of this word makes some contacts wary. Think of seeking advice, making connections and building relationships.

The Informational Interview

Informational interviews are basically extended conversations with your network of contacts which help you gather information firsthand from people who do the work in which you are interested (Bolles 2000). Just as you would for a job interview, you should prepare for an informational interview:

Research: Assess yourself, your purpose for contacting your network, what you have to offer your contact and your goals. Also research your contact's career field, specific employers and background in preparation for asking well-informed questions. Use the Internet, library, Career Services staff and Resource Center, alumni, etc.

Resumes: Bring some copies to your interview to provide background information to your contact, reinforce points of your introduction, and potentially get a critique.

Attire: Dress on the conservative side, clean and presentable. When in doubt, a business suit is recommended.

Conversations typically last 20-30 minutes and involve asking questions about:

- Your contact's career field
- Your contact's specific employer
- Your contact's specific job
- Preparation for the career field
- Your contact's career path
- Organizational culture of your contact's employer(s)
- Opportunities for advancement
- General advice and referrals

You may also be asked questions about yourself, your career interests, your experience and skills and your coursework. Always ask your contact for more referrals!

Networking Tools

Being organized when networking keeps your network productive. Craft a targeted, updated resume which you carry in a portfolio, briefcase or some other protective enclosure to keep it clean and crisp. Have business cards handy or create networking cards (for seekers currently not employed) with your name and contact information. Consider creating a personal website, being cautious of security. List your web address on printed materials. Collect business cards, log your activities and use a filing system (e.g. Rolodex, index cards, computer database).

Follow-Up with Your Contacts

All of your preparation can be undone if you fail to thank those who help you. Acknowledge everyone in your network, not just those in a position to hire you, with thank-you notes. In addition, send follow-up notes keeping your contacts informed of your progress and the results of the advice they gave you.

Getting Help with Your Search

Career Services staff members as well as numerous SU alumni are available to help you in the search process for jobs, internships and graduate/professional school. Contact Career Services at (512) 863-1346 to make an appointment with a career advisor. Check out our website at www.southwestern.edu/careers for more search tools, including Internet resources like PirateLink. Finally, visit the Resource Center to use publications including:

Bolles, Richard (2000), "What Color is Your Parachute," Ten Speed Press

Hansen, Katharine (2000), "A Foot in the Door: Networking Your Way into the Hidden Job Market," Ten Speed Press

Lerner, Marcy, et. al (2001), "Vault Guide to Schmoozing: Insider Advice on Making Contacts and Building Rapport to Boost Your Career," Vault.com Inc.