

## Networking: An Essential Tool for a Healthy Career!

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Building a strong professional network is essential to optimizing your career. A strong network can lead to professional opportunities that might not otherwise be available. And in a down economy, the importance of your network is absolutely critical. When the economy hits bottom, as was the case in 2009, job seekers will find that recruiters are going to be focused on very specific searches, and the online submission process becomes an insane numbers game. The reality is when the economy hits bottom; your personal network is your best friend.

Building a network is not something that comes naturally to many people, and even fewer people approach networking with any kind of strategic focus. The purpose of this article is to provide some strategic and tactical ideals for building your network.

### **Networking: The Wrong Way**

For many, networking isn't something they think about until they are out of work. After not having done anything to build their network for years, they suddenly show up to a professional organization's chapter meeting or networking event with 40-50 other people who may also be out of work, along with four or five hiring directors who are afraid to make eye contact with anyone in the room. This, my friends is not networking.

***I am a big believer that you build your network during good times and leverage it during the bad times!*** That is not completely accurate, as you should really be building and working your network at all times. But waiting until the economy tanks to start networking is definitely not a recipe for success.

### **Networking Done Right**

#### *Get outside your comfort zone!*

Networking can be a challenge even for extraverted people, and downright painful for the introverted. But it is important to push outside of your comfort zone. If you go to a networking event and sit with or interact primarily with your friends and co-workers, you have defeated the purpose. The idea is to expand your sphere of connection and meet people outside your current circle.

#### *Continuous Networking*

Networking should be a continuous process, I know, easier said than done. Like many things, unless you set up some specific metrics, networking efforts become susceptible to procrastination. Hold yourself accountable by integrating networking into your goal setting and calendar. Some examples might be:

- I will attend 12 chapter meetings or networking events this year
- At each event I attend, I will try to introduce myself to 5 new people, and two in-depth conversations
- I will make sure to reach out to two people within my existing network monthly

#### *Focus on the Relationship First*

Trying to start a relationship by giving your elevator pitch and announcing that you are looking for work is an automatic way to put the other person in a defensive posture. There needs to be some reciprocity and sincerity in any relationship. Instead, focus on making a connection. Show genuine interest in the individual both personally and professionally. Let your natural curiosity be the guide.

#### *Ask not what they can do for you; figure out what you can do for them!*

Too often people try to start a networking relationship by asking for something: an interview; an introduction, etc. But think how much more fruitful a relationship might be if you focused on what you might be able to do for someone else.

Maybe you talked about food and you can share a recommendation for a favorite restaurant. How about sharing a link to a great white paper you recently read. Maybe you can put them in touch with someone that might be able to help them solve a business or technical problem you discussed. Bottom line, if you find a way to start a relationship by offering something, instead of asking for something, you will be building some currency you might be able to draw upon in the future.

### Relationships need to be cultivated

If you meet someone but never have any further contact other than the exchange of business cards, you really haven't built a relationship. Relationships, like a garden, need attention and cultivation over time. The interactions don't always need to be extensive, but there needs to be some regular frequency. Fortunately, email and social media offer quick and easy ways to stay in touch. Congratulate someone on their promotion. Send along an interesting link or article (indicating why you thought they might be interested in), or something (tastefully) humorous to brighten their day. Send an email just to check in and say hello. The key is to maintain some form of contact or connection on an ongoing basis.

### **Strategic Networking**

It is also important that you build your network in a strategic way. The idea is to consciously be building your network with various key constituencies.

### Within Your Organization

There are several strategic relationships you can seek out within your organization. First, seek out a good mentor or two; these should be well respected people that can serve as a role a model for your future development. You should be able to turn to them for advice, and in many cases, they can help guide your career within the organization. Similarly, it is smart to develop relationships with key stakeholders in the organization - in some cases these might be key business partners. Finally, build relationships with people in areas of the organization in which you might have an interest in exploring.

### Outside the Organization

Professional organizations like ISACA can be a great place to build relationships. Getting involved or volunteering with a professional organization provides you with an opportunity to work with people towards a common goal. It's a great way to build friendships, as well as to showcase your leadership abilities to people outside of your own organization.

Birds of a feather organizations (e.g., SAP or ACL User Groups; IT Audit Director Roundtable, Cloud Security Alliance, etc.) can be a great place to network with people with similar interests. This can also be a great environment to gain and share knowledge and best practices that you can take back to your own organization.

Finally, it is important to have developed a relationship with a reputable recruiter. Granted, I am not completely unbiased here, but simply put, a recruiter can: be your eyes and ears towards the market; provide you access to opportunities that you might not otherwise have access; help you get your foot in the door (someone to tell your story versus being one of many applicants); and someone who can provide valuable career advice. You should develop this relationship before you need it.

### Former Colleagues

One of the most important relationships to maintain is with former colleagues. If your reputation is strong, these contacts can sometimes result in you getting your foot in the door even if a company isn't hiring. *It is also critical to maintain these relationships so you can draw upon them for professional references.*

Networking is not something that comes easy for many. I'm a pretty extroverted person, and I have to admit that there are times when I have to push myself in this area. But there is no mistake that we live in a day and age where networking is absolutely essential. Like most things, if you work at it and try to interject some fun, it becomes easier over time. Good times or bad, your network can be one of your best assets.

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