

How to Build an Effective Network

Joseph Haas

Even if you're not looking for a new job right now, effective networking can help you develop relationships that could be beneficial in your job and valuable in a job search in the future.

On the surface, networking may seem straightforward. It's simply a matter of talking to people and building relationships. But there are several tips and techniques you can use to improve your networking skills. While some techniques may seem elementary, others could give you an edge to succeed in your career.

Identify your network—Develop a list of all your contacts, ranging from your relatives, friends, and acquaintances to your educational, work, and community contacts. Remember that everyone has connections. Make sure that your contacts know about your background and your professional employment goals. Connections—whether it's through your colleague, brother, or postal carrier—can make the difference over a job seeker with no connections.

Expand your network—Although it's natural to mingle with those you know best, make an extra effort to meet new people at gatherings. For example, set a personal goal to meet at least one new person at each meeting or event you attend. And once you've developed new contacts, nurture them. Don't lose touch.

Get involved—Attend workshops, volunteer for committees, seek leadership positions, and write for trade publications. Local biomedical societies, for example, can be a good networking avenue. "Both the membership dues and conference fees are extremely affordable," notes John Storch, a radiology equipment specialist from West Allis Memorial Hospital in Wisconsin.

Attend professional conferences—Mike Capuano, manager of biomedical technology for Hamilton Health Sciences in Ontario, says networking—both to keep up-to-date on industry issues and build relationships with colleagues and vendors—is his primary reason for attending conferences. It's also an important selling point to convince his superiors to pay for the trip.

"I found networking to be an easier task after attending a number of conferences. You get to know the conference culture and recognize people who attend on a



Mike Capuano

regular basis. It then becomes easier to get your face into conversations, ask questions at sessions, and provide input," Capuano says. "Dialogue with vendors and colleagues at exhibition booths allows familiarity with others and helps break the ice when formal meetings occur."

Don't leave home without it—Even if you are not looking for a job, always bring business cards—and resumes if you'd like—to meetings.

Make the right approach—Be genuine and authentic when networking, and it will help to build trust. Also be direct, but not overbearing.

Don't show up with your resume and ask if the other person knows of any jobs. Instead, seek their tips, leads, and suggestions. "Try saying something as straightforward as: 'You're plugged into what's going on around town. Any suggestions on who I can talk to about what might be coming up in the future?'" says Joanne Reid, a consultant, in an article published at WorkTree.com.

Treat your job search as a mission—Be disciplined about achieving goals. Set deadlines for yourself, practice what you want to say to people, and make telephone calls when your energy level is highest. Always follow up on telephone calls and meetings with letters and e-mails to express your appreciation for their time.

Take the lead—Try hosting your own networking "happy hour" event. As host, it will make it easier to approach people and you can select the guest list.

Don't forget the Internet—Listservs, such as the Biomedtalk-L, can be a low-cost source to expand your professional contacts around the world. But don't rely too much on the Internet. People still feel most connected to those who they meet in person.

Treat others as you would like to be treated—Networking is a two-way street, so remember to help your contacts. In fact, volunteer to help them. When someone provides you with help or a job lead, don't forget to say thanks. It may mean more than you realize.

As the Career and Placement Services office at the University of Alberta in Canada notes: "Effective networking requires time, energy, and organization."

Joseph Haas is a staff writer at AAMI.