Networking Techniques and Informational Interviews

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Compliments of
The Weston Career Resources Center
Uncovering the Hidden Job Market

There’s an adage that the only job security is the ability to secure a job. Since the average person will change jobs seven to ten times in a lifetime—a number that has increased in recent decades—this kernel of wisdom holds true now more than ever before. And when faced with the need to secure a job, no other single competency counts for so much as that of networking: More than 70 percent of the people who succeed in landing a job do so through the networking process. Whether you’re entering the workforce for the first time or switching jobs mid-career, it pays to sharpen your networking skills—to cultivate a network of contacts that can continue to yield benefits throughout your career.

Why is networking so important? It’s simply the best way to tap into the hidden job market—an immense underground marketplace in which jobs open up and then are filled through word of mouth and personal referrals. The majority of jobs are filled this way, and the operant principle is the known person gets the job.

Networking expands your options, sometimes in unexpected ways: Skillful networking reveals positions that have not yet been posted, discloses jobs that will never be advertised in the classifieds. Networking can get your foot in the door before a position is available. When the job opens up—if you’ve established a relationship with the hiring manager—he or she remembers you before pondering the heap of faceless résumés that come from Human Resources.

Your key for unlocking the hidden job market is your network of contacts. Centuries ago, fishermen discovered they could catch more fish with a net that could be cast over an expanse of water than they could with a line and pole. Similarly, enterprising job seekers long ago discovered that an interrelated web of contacts could yield more job prospects than they might produce by themselves.

What is Networking?

Networking involves gathering a list of contacts that might be able to help you with your job-hunting process—and contacting them to publicize your availability, to get advice and information about trends in your industry, and to obtain potential job leads. Networking begins with the people you already know, and expands into an interrelated web of contacts by means of introduction to others.

There are many benefits to successfully orchestrating this process. Networking:

- Gets your message out—publicizes your availability
- Allows you to gather marketplace information
- Helps you to accumulate information on target organizations
- Enables you to get advice and ideas
- Locates sponsors and mentors
- Generates referrals that further build your network
- Develops life-long contacts who may help you later
Despite the emphasis placed on it, however, networking remains one of the most misunderstood dimensions of the search process. While for some lucky people, networking seems to come naturally, many job seekers are intimidated by the process, or are unsure exactly how to go about it: Who do you talk to? How do you approach them? What do you say once you’ve reached them? How do you get a face-to-face meeting? What do you tell them about yourself? What do you ask? How do you overcome your fear of reaching out to people to ask them for a meeting?

If the process seems intimidating, it shouldn’t. Most people enjoy and are even flattered by an opportunity to help. To a great extent, you will be networking with people you know, or people with whom you have something in common. If you ask a friend or acquaintance to help you or give you some information, most will gladly comply, if they can. Others have helped them in the past in their own job search process. When you contact people for information, they usually appreciate the principle that “what goes around comes around”—and recognize that it is their turn to help. This holds even more true when the economy is sluggish and the job market is depressed: The basis for the remarkable success of the networking approach in good times and bad is a common awareness that we need to help each other.

An important distinction exists between two different types of networking: the type of networking that focuses on finding a specific hidden job—and “informational interviewing,” an approach that emphasizes learning more about a career. In the former, you are publicizing your availability and seeking potential job leads. In the latter, you are not looking for a specific job, you are gathering information and advice—screening potential careers and jobs before you decide to pursue them. In this information guide, we will review both of these vital tools in your job search strategy.
Your Networking Strategy

Building Your Master Contact List

Begin by building a master contact list. Your list starts with the people you already know, and grows by means of introduction to others. Many job seekers complain that they don’t know enough people to allow networking to work effectively for them. But you don’t have to know a great many people at the beginning. Everybody knows somebody; start with the few you know, and ask them to introduce you to others they know. It doesn’t take long before you have more people in your network than you need to accomplish your purpose.

First, start by making a list of people you know—not just people in the specific career field in which you are interested. Include them regardless of what they do or where they work. Don’t exclude people just because you cannot see right now how they might be able to further your career objectives. Sometimes opportunities manifest in ways we do not expect; be open to all possibilities at this stage.

Include your former high school and college classmates. Include your professors. Include people from your family telephone directory—your friends, relatives, doctor, dentist, insurance agent, accountant, your children’s soccer coach. Include names in the rosters of organizations you belong to—alumni associations, fraternal groups, social clubs, athletic clubs, religious organizations, and neighborhood associations. Once you have done this, you’ve got the beginnings of an excellent networking list.

The reason for starting with people you know is simple: Commonalities of interest form the basis of connecting with the people in your network. These are people with whom you share common concerns, interests, ethnic or religious background, school attachments, neighborhood interests, etc. These commonalities are what motivate them to be willing to talk with you. Also, many of these people will talk with you because they have feelings for you, or for members of your family. Your current and former schoolmates and alumni feel a sense of kinship associated with a shared school experience. Your religious leader, neighbor, and uncle all want to see you succeed.

Once you start contacting the people on your list, many of them will introduce you or refer you to other people. Add these names to your list; in this way your master contact list continues to grow.

Prioritize

Next, prioritize: Rank the people on your list according to how comfortable you feel contacting them. At the top, put the person you feel most comfortable speaking with, then the person you feel next most comfortable speaking with, etc. Continue creating your prioritized list until you reach the point where you would feel a bit awkward contacting that person. Draw a line. Then continue to add names below the line until you have added everyone you can think of. If you remember more names later, insert them in the appropriate place on your list. Suppose you have 30 names on your list, and the line
appears after number 12. The first 12 are people you know you can call and ask for a meeting with little discomfort. The other 18 you’ll approach differently.

**How to Make Contact**

Build confidence by first calling the people at the top of your list; these are the ones with whom you feel comfortable enough to ask them directly if they would be willing to meet with you.

As you progress down the list, you will reach the line that separates those you feel comfortable contacting from those you don’t know as well. At this point, try a different approach: Initiate contact by writing a short letter or email in which you introduce (or reintroduce) yourself. Explain briefly your purpose for wanting to meet with them, and close by saying you will call to set up an appointment. When you call, you will be expected, and the other person will be more likely to remember who you are. Write a script for your call beforehand if it makes you feel more comfortable.

Avoid talking business in your initial phone call; if possible, save it for the meeting. Begin with an exchange of pleasantries, then a brief statement of why you want to meet. Set up the appointment.

**Other Networking Opportunities:**

**Meetings, Conventions, Career Clubs, etc.**

The steps outlined above form the backbone of your networking strategy. In addition to this approach, however, make a point to attend or participate in some of the many meetings, clubs, associations, conventions, trade shows, social gatherings, and other types of events that occur locally and nationally. Such events represent golden opportunities for building your network of contacts. Focus especially on meetings and events in your chosen field, which are often attended by precisely the people with whom you most want to connect. Speak to people at these meetings; after brief conversations, exchange business cards. People you meet may suggest names of other people for you to contact. Add these names to your master contact list and follow up as appropriate.

Olin’s many career-related student clubs afford excellent networking opportunities. Participating in these clubs provides a great way to associate with students with similar interests and to build your personal network of contacts. Company representatives, recruiters and industry experts sometimes attend club activities. You have an opportunity to get to know them, and they have an opportunity to get to know you. A complete list of career-related student clubs is available through the Weston Career Resources Center.

**Your Two-Minute Drill**

You can use variations of your two-minute drill to introduce yourself to anyone and everyone you meet.

Don’t *memorize* your two-minute drill; you don’t want to sound like a robot. Instead, keep it conversational in tone and draw from various aspects of your education,
experience, skills, achievements, and career goals—information as appropriate to the person you are speaking with and the topic of conversation.

Following are some of the items you may want to include. Focus on those items that present you in the most positive light.

**Undergraduate Education**
- School; degree earned; extracurricular activities; scholarships; awards

**Previous Work Experience**
- Number of years experience in an industry or professional field
- Brief summary of two or three significant accomplishments, or contributions that relate to your future career goals and objectives
- Special projects, unique training, or international work assignments

**Interests**
- If you have completed CareerLeader™, use your results to talk about your interests, (i.e., Managing People and Relationships, Quantitative Analysis, Counseling and Mentoring).
- Use examples of how these interests have been used in your academic, professional or extracurricular activities, and how they relate to your future career goals and objectives.

**Skills**
- If you have completed CareerLeader™, use your results to talk about your key skills (i.e., Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Managing People).
- Use examples of how these skills have been used in your academic, professional or extracurricular activities, and how they relate to your future career goals and objectives.
- Talk about your unique skills. This could include language, technical skills, special or unique training, travel, or interesting hobbies.

**Future Career Goals and Objectives**
- Talk about your future career goals and objectives. This could include industry interests, career fields of interest, skills you bring to a new position/company, or contributions you hope to make.
Example:
My name is John Smith and I am a first year MBA student at the Olin School of Business. I earned my bachelor’s degree in business administration at Emory University. As Captain of my soccer team, I developed skills in leading and motivating my team to earn a spot in the Regional Championships my senior year. I also served as treasurer of my fraternity. While serving in this position I developed a four-year financial plan that will result in increasing our cash flow to cover all future expense. I enjoy working with people from different cultures. I learned many of these skills as a foreign exchange student living in Germany during my junior year. I have worked for the past four years in change management with a large consulting firm that gave me opportunities to work with a variety of international clients. I led teams of up to ten people on projects ranging from six weeks to six months. We consistently completed our projects within budget and with superior client satisfaction ratings. I am very interested in international business development and with the opportunities your company may have. I believe that my skills, education, and experience, combined with my career goals and objectives, could be a very good fit. Could you tell me a little more about business development and how it fits with your company’s future objectives?
Your Meeting Agenda

Have an agenda: Now that you’re calling and writing the people on your master contact list, you’re beginning to line up some appointments. What do you talk about when you meet with your contact? Networking is not just idle chitchat. If you don’t know exactly what you’re meeting about, you risk alienating your contact. You asked for the meeting, so it’s your agenda. It’s your responsibility to have an agenda of comments and questions to direct the conversation. Help the other person help you by gently steering the meeting in the direction of your objectives.

Your networking objectives: Your objectives in networking generally will be to publicize your availability, to get advice and information about trends in your industry of interest, and to get potential job leads.

Build rapport: To accomplish these aims, you must first make an effort to get to know your contacts (if you don’t already), and give them an opportunity to get to know you. Build rapport. People help other people that they like, people they trust, people who belong to a group they belong to, or people with whom they feel some connection. Take advantage of whatever you have in common with each other.

Use whatever time you need to accomplish this. The time needed to build rapport varies according to the people and the circumstances: If you meet someone randomly at a conference cocktail hour, the rapport-building phase usually happens quickly before any points of substance are discussed or cards are exchanged. If you’re developing a long-term relationship, take more time to establish your connection with them. Recognize that, in the U.S., we tend to skip over the rapport-building phase rather quickly compared to people from other cultures. If you are meeting with someone from an Asian or Latin American country, for example, they may be used to taking more time to establish a relationship before getting down to business or providing assistance.

Most people will sense, consciously or unconsciously, the attitude with which you approach them: If you approach networking simply as a way to use people as steppingstones to get what you want, it will be difficult to hide that. On the other hand, if you approach networking as a way of building and maintaining relationships for their own sake, people will feel good about you and will be eager to help any way they can.

Find out about them: People enjoy talking about themselves and their work. Ask questions that elicit information about how they got into their line of work, how their business is doing now, how they like their work, and how they see you potentially fitting into their industry or a workplace similar to their own.

Tell accomplishment stories: The information you want others to have about you should be presented in the form of short, interesting stories about your accomplishments, both in and out of the workplace. Work with your résumé to develop your repertoire of stories. Practice telling them beforehand. Use the S-A-R model: Describe the situation, the action you took, and the result. Again, keep your stories short! Avoid dominating the
conversation; try for a comfortable balance between speaking about yourself and letting the other person speak.

Prepare questions in advance: Your questions should be designed to accomplish two purposes: to get information that will be helpful to you, and to give some indication that you are well informed about their industry or company.

Gather names: Finally, gather names of other people you can talk to that will broaden the scope of your research. Many of your contacts will introduce you or refer you to other people. Add these names to your master contact list; follow up on these new contacts as appropriate.

Respect their time: Be on time. Don’t stay longer than the amount of time you requested and agreed on for the meeting. This shows respect for the other person’s time and is a fundamental principle of business etiquette.

When to meet: If you’re still employed, consider breakfast, lunch, after work, or on weekends. With friends and relatives, evenings and weekends may work best. With business contacts, take advantage of normal workday breaks. If you’re not employed and not a full-time student, any time is convenient for you. Set up the appointment when your contact is available. Many people in management positions can find time during their workday to meet with you. This allows you to meet them at their place of business, which has several advantages, as we’ll consider next:

Where to meet: Whenever possible, meet your contacts at their places of business. There are several reasons why this works in your favor. For one thing, you have an opportunity to get a feeling for the work environment. Also, when your contacts are on their own turf, they are likely to feel more relaxed; they can think better and come up with better ideas. Another reason is that your contacts will not have to take the time to travel to meet with you, and you are more likely to get more of their time. Another big advantage is that you may be introduced to your contact’s colleagues who work down the hall. Finally, and most importantly, when you meet with your contacts in their offices, they are more likely to have their contact databases at hand, increasing the likelihood that some of those important contacts will be given to you.

You may be tempted to invite your contact to meet over lunch. This is an option, but it can get expensive. When you are job hunting, your contacts often will offer to pick up the tab. When you are the one who does the inviting, however, business etiquette dictates that you pay. Another alternative is to invite your contacts to meet over a cup of coffee. The best choice, however, will almost always be to meet your contacts at their workplaces. If they invite you to lunch, you can say that you’d like to have a chance to see their office or plant, and you’d be glad to take a raincheck for lunch. Once you are employed, consider taking them to lunch as a way of thanking them and to maintain the contact.

Don’t put them on the spot: Networking etiquette requires that you not put people on the spot by asking them directly for a job. Tell everyone that you’re engaged in the job
search process, but ask no one directly for a job. You are letting them know that you are available, you are gathering information, you are seeking suggestions for other people you might talk to who might help with your job search process. Asking someone directly for a job, however, often proves counterproductive. If they do not have a job to give you—or, often, even if they do—you risk making the other person feel awkward or guilty. When someone feels awkward, they may just wish that you would go away so that they will no longer feel that way. They may subsequently avoid you. It is easier and more gracious to ask for information than to ask for a job.

Finally: Dress Professionally. Relax and be yourself. Afterwards, send a thank you note within 24 hours.
Informational Interviews

The process we’ve been describing so far is called networking. When you’re networking, it’s important to be clear about what you are doing. The kind of networking we’ve been discussing so far generally occurs after you know what career field you are interested in, and after you know what kind of position you are interested in. In your networking meetings, you are seeking information and job leads. Your aim is clear: to find a specific job.

A completely different kind of meeting occurs before you know what career field or job you are interested in. This kind of meeting is called an “informational interview,” a term coined by Richard Bolles, author of What Color Is Your Parachute?

Bolles distinguishes informational interviewing from networking: Informational interviewing is a process you engage in for the purpose of testing or screening a career before you switch to that career, or to screen jobs before you take them. Bolles makes the point that many people screen jobs after they take them, when they really should be using this technique to screen them beforehand.

Informational interviews provide valuable information to help you decide if a particular career is right for you, and, if it is, how you can prepare yourself to work in that field. If you’ve already made a tentative career choice, informational interviews can help you to learn how to get a job in that field. It is your chance to find out about the responsibilities, rewards, problems, and issues inherent in a specific career, possibly before making a long-term commitment of time or money to prepare for it.

Informational interviewing, according to Bolles, is conducted by talking to people who do the kind of work you are contemplating doing. You are not talking primarily to people who have the power to hire you, you are talking to workers who are doing the work that interests you.

When you’re conducting informational interviews, be clear about your motives: Scheduling an interview for information when you really want a job interview can ruin your chances. You are building relationships based on trust. If your contact senses that your hidden agenda is different than what you initially stated, they may feel they’ve been deceived. Deliberate misrepresentation—or a simple lack of clarity of purpose on your part—can turn a valuable and helpful contact into a reluctant ally who will be hesitant to grant any future requests.

Preparing for Informational Interviews

Here the preparation process parallels the networking steps we outlined above. In this case, however, you are seeking to identify people who can help you who are active and knowledgeable in the career field you’re researching. To do that, ask all the people you know if they are acquainted with anyone in your field of interest who might be willing to talk to you. Then, ask if you can use their name as a reference when you contact that person.
Inform yourself about the field (there are many resources available for researching career fields through the Weston Career Resources Center), the person you will be interviewing, and the organization for which the person works.

Next, prepare a list of questions you want to ask when you meet with these people. An informational interview is one of the few interviews in which you are in control of the questions asked. Your informational interview is a conversation; don’t simply read your list of questions as if it were a script. Use your list as an aid to tactfully help you keep the meeting focused on gaining the information you need. To get you started, we’ve included some sample questions on pages 10 and 11, but you will want to develop your own questions based on your situation and goals.

Practice by interviewing people for information whenever you get a chance. You can do this informally when you meet someone or practice with your friends. You will find it easy and enjoyable; people generally like to talk about themselves and their work.

**Setting Up Appointments**

Whenever possible, arrange a face-to-face interview. When that is not possible, you can conduct your informational interview by phone. Following is a sample script you can use to help you with the phone call in which you initially contact the person. Adapt it to your circumstances. Organize your thoughts before calling. Speak clearly. Practice it until you are speaking naturally and comfortably, until your voice reflects confidence, until the impression you make is professional, and until you do not sound like you are reading a prepared script. Be friendly, sincere, courteous, and polite. Avoid external distractions (e.g., gum chewing, calling from a pay phone with outside noise, background noise from a radio or other conversations, etc.).

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**Sample Phone Script for Setting Up an Informational Interview**

“Hello…(the other person’s name). My name is (your full name). (The person who referred you) suggested that I call you because of your expertise (knowledge, background, experience) in the field of …(occupation, trade, industry, profession, company) for information or advice about careers in your field.

[If calling without a reference, state how you heard about this individual, e.g., “I read about your work in…” “I heard you speak at…” “I know of your reputation through…”]

“I am interested in this field (as a possible career direction—or whatever your reasons are). I’ve read about it and discussed it with others, and I would like to know more. I would like very much to meet with you, at your convenience, for no more than 20-30 minutes, to ask you some questions. Would it be possible to arrange a time?”
Sample Questions to Ask at an Informational Interview

An informational interview is one of the few interviews in which you are in control of the questions asked. Your informational interview is a conversation; don’t simply read your list of questions as if it were a script. Use your list as an aid to tactfully help you keep the meeting focused on gaining the information you need.

We’ve included some sample questions below to get you started, but you will want to develop your own questions based on your situation and goals.

Starting Out

How would you advise someone to start building a career in your field? Where would you start? What steps should a person just starting out take? What experience will be expected? How can I get that experience? In what companies, departments, positions? What positions lead to dead ends?

Did you participate in a formal training program? Where?

What education or training is most valued? What is the necessary educational background for this field? What courses are particularly valuable? What areas of knowledge are most important for advancement in the field? What degrees? Certification? What educational institutions would you suggest?

How did you get your start? What were some of the most important factors contributing to your success? If you were starting out again, would you do anything differently?

The Job

What is a typical workweek like for you? What do you actually do?

What are some of the rewards of your occupation? Your field? What do you like most about your work?

What are some of the difficulties, frustrations, most frequently recurring problems?

How flexible can you be in this field/position? Can you work at varied hours? Can you arrange your own hours? What latitude do you have to plan your own time?

What are your major responsibilities in this job? What part do you play in deciding priorities?
Sample Questions to Ask, continued…

**Advancement**
What are some typical mistakes or errors that prevent a person from advancing in this field? From succeeding in this kind of work?

Is there personal advice you would give a person wanting to advance in your field? Wanting to build a career?

What is the range of income possible for people in this field? (By now you have researched comparative salaries on websites such as salary.com; however it is useful to compare published salaries to what your contact knows.) What is the salary structure? What is the starting salary range? The range at different levels of advancement? What benefits accrue to people in these positions?

What is developing in this field (add some of your own insights from the research you have done)? Company? Industry? Where do you see the greatest needs? What are the most important areas in this field? The major problems?

What are your projections for the future of the industry? What areas do you feel afford the greatest opportunity? The most growth? Where is expansion taking place? In what markets? With what products?

Is there a deficit of qualified personnel in any part of this field? Where is the best place to look for jobs?

Is most of the hiring here done on an external or internal basis?

**Special Interests**
Are there many women/minorities in this field?

How effective are affirmative action programs in this field? Have you seen the proportions of women/minority managers change over the past few years?

Is there any particular advice you would give to a woman/minority job candidate in this field?
After the Informational Interview

Having completed the informational interview be sure to ask for the names of other individuals who might give you different perspectives. Be sure to thank the person at the end of the interview. Be sure to send a thank-you note within 24 hours of your meeting. In your note, you can refer to key points of your discussion or your plans to follow up on specific suggestions they made.

Keep records of your discussions. After each meeting, take a few moments to jot down some notes about your conversation, especially the key points. The next time you talk to that person, refer to your notes to refresh your memory. As you talk to more people, your meeting notes will serve as a source of ideas and additional questions.

Keep track of the names, phone numbers, and addresses of the people you meet with. Stay in contact every month or so. Send them articles of interest, updates on your progress. Build on the relationship you have started; you are developing a career network that will benefit you throughout your life-long career.

With each interview you conduct, you will grow in comfort and confidence with the process. By gaining experience with informational interviews, you are developing skills that will prove invaluable in many ways throughout your career.

Even after you are employed, you should keep up the practice of meeting people—and further develop the skills you’ve started to cultivate through your informational interviewing. You never know when your network of contacts will prove useful. And remember, once you are employed, you will be called on from time to time to assist others who are seeking information and assistance in their own job search process.
Resources Available in the Career Resources Library

- *How to Work a Room* by Susan Roane
- *Market Your College Degree* by Dorothy Rogers
- *Networking for Novices* by Susan Shelly
- *Networking Made Easy* by Patty Marler and Jan Mattia
- *The Secrets of Savvy Networking* by Susan Roane
- *Vault.com Guide to Schmoozing* by Vault.com Staff