

“Sharpening the Saw” or Building Your Network

People are hiring their friends and former teammates these days. Only executives who have previous working experience with or who have known managers in transition for some time are hiring the vast majority of newly employed TENG members. In other cases, they are relying upon the counsel of other reliable sources and connections to recommend potential subordinates. They want to hand pick their team members and frequently network selectively among their contacts sharing their executive need with as few people as possible. As a case in point, I recently heard this unverified anecdote from a very credible source. A top executive, who belongs to a network group (not TENG), hired a new Vice President. Nothing is unusual about this other than that the hiring executive reportedly never publicized the need within his own network group. Instead, he selectively contacted only those colleagues he wished to consider, garnered some referrals and quietly filled the job. While this is contrary to the mission of most network groups, TENG among them, senior executives are frequently under too much stress to take the time to deal with the inevitable hurricane of Emails and voice mails of unknown people and marginal fits that will consume their time once news of the search hits cyberspace. The hiring executive would rather perform an undercover search than explain to a number of their business colleagues why they were not considered. As a recruiter, I can relate to this dilemma. Over the years, my time has been drained by countless phone calls from well-respected but inappropriate candidates who try to sell me on why they fit my current search. This is one of the many reasons why, in better economic times, companies hire search firms.

This popular type of selective network hiring does not add to my bottom line, but in our present economic condition with its attendant tight hiring market, it is the dominant method, and will remain so until the business climate improves and everyone’s private reserve of contacts is re-employed. The bond of hiring a friend or former colleague is very powerful. While this doesn’t always lead to the best hire, it still happens quite frequently because making a poor hire has burned all of us on at least one occasion and we are looking for a proven player who comes well recommended.

Here are some recent hiring scenarios shared by TENG members:

- An employer rehired one executive who had left two years previously, to pursue an entrepreneurial dream but who had also stayed in touch with his former management.
- Another executive had been in conversation with his new employer for the past year. Once the right opportunity surfaced he was given the nod.
- One TENG member can trace the origin of his relationship with his newest employer to a contact he established with them during a career search two jobs ago.
- A newly hired CIO is relocating half way across the country to a city rich with qualified senior IT candidates that were not considered. Two former co-workers who are C-level executives of his new company quietly referred him to the CEO and the hire was consummated. This CEO would rather pay an expensive relocation for a known, recommended CIO than “save” money by hiring a local, but unknown candidate.

- Other newly hired TENG members report that they have been in discussion with their new employers for six to eight months and longer. Others are in exploratory talks that have been ongoing for some time and expect offers in the coming months.

So how do you become an insider? How do you get yourself to become the anointed hire, while your competitors' resumes are caught in Email limbo? Very few of us are born networking professionals. Most of us are uncomfortable with networking and need time to get our feet wet. Changing from senior executive with a staff to answer your every command to a sales representative knocking on doors is not easy and may be humiliating at best. People that you wouldn't dream of hiring to work for you are saying "no" to you and are being somewhat rude about it. This is tough on anybody's ego. If you learn nothing else, you must never refuse a networking phone call or Email from now on. You must not only build your network of contacts but also you must then develop as many of your new contacts as possible into enduring relationships.

Consider these basics:

- You will not build network contacts by posting resumes to job boards. Companies place jobs on the Web to collect resumes, not to create relationships. The purpose of employment advertising is to attract people while keeping them at arms length. Continue to answer jobs posted on line, but this should be a small portion of your search activity.
- Andy Walker, Lead Consultant of Gartner Group People Cubed, in his presentation to the TENG Stamford Chapter on June 18, 2002, stated his company's findings indicate that an executive in transition needs to spend sixty per cent of her or his time networking in order to generate a sufficient number of interviews.
- An increasing number of senior executives are becoming aware of the value of networking, not just to collaborate on career searches, but also to discuss other common areas of interest, such as management, governance, technology and general business topics. You must maintain the habit of networking after you are hired. Apply to it the same discipline that you do to your daily exercise routine.
- Many of these same executives, including CEO's, are more receptive than ever to speak with other professionals to exchange leads and ideas. I receive frequent Emails from CEO's looking to network for their next opportunity.
- Our sister organization, the Financial Executives Network Group (FENG), has been the second greatest single contributor to our membership growth behind our own member referrals. The FENG members also receive our newsletters and many of them have sent new member nominations to me via Email saying something like, "This is the best IT person I have ever known..." By the way, these are the same CFO's that many of you feel are blocking your career success. With that in mind, maybe you should contact every financial executive you have ever known and try to reconnect with them.

- You may feel that you are in a position of weakness calling someone who is employed while you are enduring this transition period but may be very willing to speak with you. Forming a relationship with you will have value for them sometime in the future when you are employed and they are in transition. This is a very likely outcome, given the volatility of the executive suite. All of us will experience peaks and valleys in our careers. It is our network of friends that help us get through the rough times. Some may be too busy to take your calls and others will lack the foresight, but those who accept your call or answer your Email could become valuable partners in coming years.
- Broaden your network to include CEO's, CFO's and any other senior executive. Virtually all of them will have IT-related connections. While you're at it, it will help to let your relatives, friends, neighbors and other personal contacts know that you are seeking leads for your next position. You may be surprised at who knows or is married to someone who may make a significant contribution to your search.
- Networking is the number one vehicle for executive hiring. As an executive recruiter, I would prefer that this were not the case, however, in a tight market such as our present one, networking is the dominant vehicle for locating your next opportunity. Continue to contact reputable search firms and build relationships with them as well. You may find that you are being added to their database. As the pace of hiring picks up, their business will return. One of them may call you with a future opportunity.

Your greatest enemy exists between your ears. This is a time to reach out to others, not to turn inward in self-pity. Build your network aggressively, nurture it, and maintain it and it will take care of you. Creating your network is part of a journey. A new discovery awaits you with every handshake.
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