

Debra Feldman is the head of JobWhiz, a career management and transition firm for executives. She shared some of her articles with us over the past few months and is the author of our latest newsletter. Sharing her article with our members does not mean that the TENG, Bruner Consulting or I am endorsing her services. In this offering, she offers four strategies for networking. If you have been in extended transition, you may be tired of reading articles on networking techniques, nonetheless, by reading as many as possible, you then pull out the appropriate elements from each and combine them into a program that is tailored for you. If you wish to send her feedback or contact her, you will find her Web address and phone number at the end of this article. I am grateful for her contribution. Ed Pospesil

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Purposeful Career Networking: Four Easy Strategies that Really Work

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Dictionary.com does a tremendous job of defining networking showing both the computer-related meanings and the one I wanted explaining contacts, reciprocity, give and take, informal communicating, etc. Thank goodness that I remembered about dictionaries because I was dumbfounded by an online search that listed technical, computer science-related networking topics and nary a single one dealing with how to connect with people, share ideas and support each other, i.e. networking.

Label me naïve because my strategic job search business is built on my networking skills. I had assumed that there would be a host of sites touting all kinds of secrets for more savvy interactions, how to break into an influential network, what to do as part of a network, how to be more effective when networking, networking etiquette and a host of other related themes. I'm not guaranteeing that you won't be able to find better networking resources online than I did, but I will tell you that if they are on the web then they aren't popping up in the first dozen entries under the key word networking.

Being of the glass half full mentality, I decided this could represent a perfect opportunity to develop a site specializing in business networking or at the very least to write an article designed especially individuals of the computer science networking ilk to tell more about the other kind of networking, the kind that advances careers through who not what you know. For instance, I started brainstorming on a site dedicated to networking skills, much like one that might, say teach how to sail (on the internet, surfing, yes, but sailing?!) There could be daily tips, featured articles by experts in different fields with a common networking theme, a question/answer column to improve networking skills, links to relevant sites, teleclasses and so much more. There are some excellent sites that intentionally connect individuals so they can network: networks of former employees, networks for school alumni, and networks for those with common interests. The

challenge remains: after you identify someone you want to know, what do you say to encourage a meaningful dialogue leading up to getting the information or help you expect they can offer?

I'm sure if I wanted to research this further I would find more than the books and guides I did locate available for purchase online. I know for sure that there are lots of articles written on the subject focused on how networking is essential to career progression and how networking is the way to find out about unadvertised jobs in the hidden job market. Go to any major online job board or professional association and you are sure to find some networking help. What I am getting at is this: networking is more of an art than a science and not necessarily a skill that people can easily acquire through studies or instruction. It's more a gift of communication and interpersonal skills than a series of techniques and methods that can be memorized or learned. So what's one that isn't blessed with the networking gene to do, given that networking has been demonstrated to be mission critical to career progression, especially within the more senior ranks where who you know often supercedes what you know in swaying employers to choose similarly credentialed and qualified competitors? Given these circumstances, it's imperative if you are seeking a new career challenge to master whatever networking skills you can and to use them to help you job search more effectively.

To begin, let's review the definition of networking from Dictionary.com.

v. **net·worked, net·work·ing, net·works**

Computer Science. To connect (computers) into a network.

v. *intr.*

To interact or engage in informal communication with others for mutual assistance or support.

Now examine ways you can network, relatively easily and painlessly to further your career and develop the kind of contacts that will enable you to have a competitive edge in the job market by hooking you up with inside leads before they are announced to the general public.

1. **Be realistic in your networking expectations.** Don't beat yourself up to become a suave, busy networker by tomorrow. Think of your business networking the way you do of constructing a sound, reliable technical network architecture. First get the strategic plan right, and then figure out how you are going to implement it and then begin the actual process of forming new relationships. Rome wasn't built in a day, the Internet wasn't built overnight and your personal network is going to take time to develop. If you have a vision directing the growth of your network, then you can use it as an outline governing your introductions, interactions and

networking activities. Think of starting your network along the same lines as you would launching a project, take the lifecycle approach to specifying the stages and benchmarks to keep it moving in the right direction towards your goals and objectives.

2. **Set networking goals and objectives for yourself.** What do you want to accomplish? If it is just to find a new job, you are likely not going to achieve this as quickly as you might want. You have to gain the trust of new contacts and increase your credibility by demonstrating that you are skilled, knowledgeable, deliver on your word and are unselfish in exchanges. Building business relationships shares much in common with creating new personal relationships. The purpose for interacting may be different, but the two forms of connecting with others for the first time share many of the same characteristics: depth, commitment, value, frequency, trust factor, etc. To accelerate these and help a networking relationship flourish, it takes effort, purposeful actions to cultivate and nurture the right qualities. Just because networking is for business purposes and not personal reasons, doesn't eliminate the emphasis on good manners, being empathetic and paying careful attention to the give and take of the relationship. If this last gets off balance, the progress so far may well be lost or have to be recovered. So be sure to be mindful that you give as well as take in your networking activities.
3. **Determine what you want or need** from colleagues in your network and then identify ways to obtain results matching your requirements. Purposefully networking means designing a network that includes relationships to further your goals. If you are going to invest in forming relationships, you might as well shoot to become involved and be an insider or trusted colleague of those who have relationships, knowledge, access or ideas that will be useful to progress your own initiatives. Wouldn't it be pointless to know a lot of wine connoisseurs if you are allergic to alcohol and the sole purpose of a networking organization was to meet and try different varieties of wine? Forming connections and sharing experiences and gaining insights from others with similar goals, interests, beliefs, etc. will benefit you because such people are more likely to take to you, enjoy your company and want to assist and support you.
4. **Use your time judiciously** for networking being selective to seek out quality not quantity of connections. If you focus your efforts on opportunities that fit in with a plan, then a few strong relationships that are dependable and productive are better than a bunch of superficial connections that don't provide meaningful support. In choosing where and when to network, it's a long-term investment. You want to be on influential, well-networked contacts radar so they seek you out for advice or tasks. If you just know a lot of people superficially, chances are not great that you will be the first person on their go-to list when an appropriate referral or recommendation opportunity sprouts. That's why it is key to be selective, to target your networking purposefully to form meaningful connections that have an easy and useful give and take. If you network with those with whom you share common interests, the rest, ie. more connections and good relationships furthering your goals, will follow naturally.

Obviously this is not an itemized list of how to network, what to say to strangers, how to make friends and influence people. Rather, if you follow these guidelines, you will have a healthy framework on which to design and purposefully construct networking relationships that are genuine and lasting. The better the quality of your connections, the more productive the interactions and the more likely that you will be one of the first insiders to learn of opportunities, both personal and professional.

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