



Focus Your Networking for Greater Success

by John West Hadley

What do you think of when someone talks about networking? Does the term conjure up an image of someone smoothly sliding across the room, shaking hands with everyone, moving quickly from person to person, looking for a good “prospect”? Someone who never really creates more than a superficial relationship with any one person? That’s a common perception. That is not what I consider networking, or at least it’s not effective networking.

I’m a firm believer in the power of networking, and I consistently advise my career search clients that they should spend the majority of their time networking. Effective networking is also critical to shaping your future career opportunities.

It is your network that provides critical resources and information you can tap into. Your network gives you the perspective of viewpoints and expertise outside of your current operation, company or industry that make you more valuable in any discussion. And it is your network that you can fall back on when you are looking for your next opportunity, or that often will bring you opportunities when you aren’t seeking them.

It is absolutely critical that you maintain and build your network at all times, even when you are your busiest and not just when it’s convenient. You want to have a network to draw on whenever you need it and not be caught just trying to rebuild it at a critical juncture! In fact, this is a common trap consultants fall prey to. We get very busy servicing our existing clients, so that our efforts at creating and fostering other relationships fall

by the wayside. As a result, we keep following the peaks in our business with deep valleys, due to the corresponding up and down cycles in our pipelines.

My own experience is that every job I have ever had, plus my consulting practices, arose out of my networking activities. Now, given how vitally important I’m suggesting networking is to your future, you might think that I would advise you to network all the time. That you should look at every meeting as another place to work at expanding and building your network. Definitely not! You should be very focused in your networking activity. Be open to all networking opportunities that present themselves, but also be very selective in what you actually choose to do.

Many people confuse being open to networking opportunities with always being on stage. They are constantly in a selling mode, trying hard to shake as many hands as possible, and in the process actually rub a great many people the wrong way. I remember one recruiter who wandered around a Society of Actuaries conference in a dumpy suit carrying a shopping bag and sticking pens in everyone’s hands. While I kept the pen, his name on it only served as a continual reminder of one headhunter with whom I would never work. This is similar to the person who runs around networking events handing everyone in sight a business card. That is not networking. That’s giving out a lot of cards that are mostly going to wind up in the trash. Networking is about building relationships, and that takes time and effort.



John West Hadley, FSA, is principal of John Hadley Associates. He can be reached at John@JHACareers.com. To subscribe to his free Career Tips newsletter, visit his Web site at www.jhacareers.com.

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I've met many people who try to go to a wide variety of networking events, constantly meeting lots of new people. Where they tend to fall down is in relationship building outside of those events. Simply attending many different events doesn't accomplish all that much. It does get you initial contacts, but the point of such events is not to bend someone's ear for an extended period.

That initial contact should just be about establishing some common ground, building rapport and creating interest in taking the relationship further. It's the meetings, e-mails and phone calls in between events that build and ripen relationships into meaningful opportunities. And if you spend a great deal of time and energy attending a lot of different networking events, you may not have enough time left over to do the follow up that bears the real fruit!

As a result, I've severely limited my own memberships in networking groups. Last year a good friend and business colleague invited me to a new networking group that met bi-weekly, and I enjoyed both the people in it and the 'feel' of the group. Afterwards I considered joining. On reflection, I concluded that I could only participate meaningfully in that group if I was prepared to drop out of at least one of the other two business networking groups I attend regularly.

My message to you is to be very selective about your networking. This doesn't mean to stop networking for any period of time. You should make it a habit to be doing some level of networking, or relationship building at all times. Yes, you may do less of it during your

busy season, but even then you need to actively plan some networking activities into your schedule each week. But you should spend a little time planning out which networking activities and events are most likely to help you develop the relationships you seek, or to provide you with the long-term visibility your search or business requires. Then make sure you are allocating enough time and energy to build on those events instead of just attending them. □

