NETWORKING AND INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

The word “networking,” is a buzzword that’s tossed around a lot, and it has multiple meanings and connotations. In some sense, we all use networking in our daily lives. We find hairdressers or car repair shops through referrals from other people. We make new friends through existing friends.

For the job seeker, however, networking means one thing: opportunity.

Networking, in a professional sense, is an organized method of making links from the people you know to the people they know, to exchange information, advice, contacts or support. Networking is a process of building relationships, which will continue throughout your career.

Benefits of Networking

• Obtain information about your field
• Clarify your job target/skills
• Make contacts at companies where a position may exist
• Get the names of additional people who could know of a possible position

How Do I Start?

Make a list of people you know, taking into consideration the following categories:

• Family/Inner Circle: relatives, extended family (in-laws, close friends of family), business associates of relatives
• School: professors, past teachers, administrators (your program coordinator, academic advisor), support staff, alumni
• Friends: people you socialize with, see at parties, parents/family of those friends, friends you rarely see but talk to frequently, e-mail contacts
• Athletics/Recreation: members of leagues, intramural teams, coaches, people you talk to at the gym
• Clubs/Organizations: fraternity/sorority members, professional association members, place of worship
• Past Employers: supervisors, co-workers, customers

Once you have identified who you know, it is essential to find out who they know. Put the word out. Talk to people! Tell others that you are looking for advice and information on job openings and careers. Ask specifically whether your contacts know anyone who can help. Give them a copy of your resume and explain cooperative education (if appropriate). Organization is key to good networking; be sure to develop a way to keep track of all your leads.

Informational Interviews

One of the easiest and most effective ways to meet people in a professional field is to conduct informational interviews. Informational interviewing is a networking approach, which allows you to: meet key professionals, gather career information, investigate career options, get advice on job search techniques and get referrals to other professionals.

The art of informational interviewing is in knowing how to balance your hidden agenda (to locate a job) with the unique opportunity to learn firsthand about the demands of your field. Thus, never abuse your privilege by asking for a job, but execute your informational interviews skillfully, and a job may follow.

What Can an Informational Interview Accomplish?

• Expand your information regarding a specific career/job market
• Help to clarify your goals and serve as a reality check for some of your assumptions/perceptions
• Bring your career research to life by gaining first-hand, current information from someone in your field
• Establish the first link to eventual job targets and build your professional network
• May uncover hidden job opportunities

Who to Contact?
• Those who work in *settings* you like (e.g. manufacturing, business, government)
• People in *career areas* you are interested in (e.g. process engineer, market researcher, systems analyst)
• Those who work in *specific jobs in specific organizations* (e.g. process engineer at Intel, or graphic designer at Saatchi)

Where to Find These People
Use your network, which is described above. You can also call community service agencies and trade organizations e.g., Rotary Club, business and professional organizations, women’s organizations, Chamber of Commerce and alumni organizations.

What Motivates Professionals to Grant Informational Interviews?
The reasons are varied. Generally, most people enjoy sharing information about themselves and their jobs and, particularly, love giving advice. Some may simply believe in encouraging newcomers to their profession and others may be scoping out prospects for anticipated vacancies. It is common for professionals to exchange favors and information, so do not hesitate to call upon people.

How Do You Set Up Informational Interviews?
Personal referral is the most effective. Have a mutual acquaintance be the bridge to your contact. Telephone contact is the next best route if you do not have a personal referral. Letters are most effective when they are followed by a telephone call. Send a letter requesting a brief informational interview (clearly indicating the purpose of the meeting, and communicating the fact that there is no job expectation).

Examples of How to Make the Contact:
Case 1: Let's say you have identified someone you want to talk to. You ask around and discover that Susan in your physics class knows the person you are trying to contact. You have decided to call, but what do you say?
“Hello, my name is ____________. Susan Langford suggested that I call you. I am considering a career in urban planning and would be interested in any information or advice you could share with me. Could we set up a time for about 20 minutes, to talk about this?

Case 2: What if you do not have a personal referral, such as in this case:
“Ms. Darcy, I am ____________, a student at RIT. I am very interested in a career in the travel industry. I have read your travel column in the paper and I understand you have been involved in this field for some time. I would be interested in your personal perspective about careers in travel. Could we arrange an appointment time next week?”

How Do You Prepare For Informational Interviews?
Prepare for your informational interviews just as you would for an actual job interview: polish your presentation and listening skills, and conduct preliminary research on the organization. You should outline an agenda that includes well-thought-out questions.

Learn as much as possible about the organization and something about the person you will be interviewing (e.g. title). Dress professionally and bring a copy of your resume (to be presented upon request).

Always remember to send a thank you letter to every person who grants you time and to every individual who refers you to someone.
Sample Questions for the Informational Interview:
Know exactly what kind of information you want. The following are examples of possible topics of conversation for the interview. Use these as guidelines to come up with questions that are important to you.
- How did you get into this line of work? Get started in this job?
- How did you prepare yourself for this job? This profession?
- What is the most valuable thing you learned in college?
- Knowing what you know now, would you take the same job again? Why or why not?
- What do you like most about it? Like least about it? What do you find most rewarding about your work?
- What skills or personal qualities are necessary in this career?
- What do you do in a typical day?
- What type of people do you work with?
- What are other specialties in this career area? Get referrals if appropriate.
- What are your organization’s goals at this time?
- Would you advise people to enter this career area? Why or why not?
- What classes can I take, or projects can I do, to prepare myself for this career area?
- What, in your opinion, is the job outlook in this career area? What will affect its growth or decline?
- Where else could I find people involved in this activity? What other settings or industries do, (e.g. accountants) work in? Get referrals if appropriate.
- Are you active in any professional organizations in our field and which would you recommend?

How to Conduct an Informational Interview:
- Arrive 10-15 minutes early for your appointment.
- Be able to introduce yourself effectively in a minute or two.
- Be prepared to discuss your own interests, skills and values and how they relate to the career in which you have interest.
- Adhere to the original time request of 20-30 minutes.
- Ask for referrals to other appropriate individuals in the field.
- Stay true to your request for information - let the individual you are interviewing bring up specific job openings.
- Always follow-up with a thank you note.
- Keep the door open to remain in touch with this new member of your network.
- Evaluate your interview and determine if you accomplished your goal(s).
- Contact referrals you received as soon as possible.