

# Conscious Careering

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**Kneejerk networking can cripple a job search; when starting to look for a new job, don't reach out before you're ready!**

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Okay, be honest. At some point during your professional career, haven't you've used the phrase "I'll keep my eyes and ears open for you" to blow off a close friend or family member that came to you for help with their job search?

While rarely talked about in the frenzy of books and career advice columns praising "networking" as the end-all and be-all of career advancement, I think it's important to note that networking, done poorly or impulsively, can actually do significant damage to your prospects of landing new employment. No matter how driven you are to find work, successful networking takes more than simply going out and hitting people up right and left for leads, referrals, and advice. If you're not making a positive first impression on the people you meet, and coming across as a winner in every sense of the word, you could rub elbows with a thousand people and not be a single iota farther along toward securing a steady paycheck.

Why does this happen to be the case? Doesn't the old saying "it's not what you know, but who you know" imply that your best odds for success are to reach out to as many people as possible for help, sooner rather than later?

As a career coach exposed on a daily basis to the realities of job search networking, I'm afraid I must respond "not necessarily" to the above question. It is my absolute conviction that many job hunters dive into the networking process weeks before they are actually ready to do it right -- and therefore end up squandering the potential return they could gain from this critical career success channel.

In most cases, this premature networking is simply due to a fundamental lack of awareness about relationship politics. Many job seekers fail to realize that any significant personal or professional relationship pivots around the shared perception that the relationship is a win/win affair for both parties involved. In other words, the moment a relationship feels like an "all give and no get" proposition to one side or another, the party's over. The connective tissue of the relationship will start to dissolve and one person or the other will begin to withdraw, often under the cover of cozy platitudes such as the

one which I illustrated in the first paragraph of this column.

Therefore, in a job search scenario where you're going to be asking people for some significant favors, it's imperative to think about what your contacts will be getting out of the deal, in return. Will it be their expectation that you'll return the favor someday? Will you make them look good to the people and contacts that they entrust you with? Will your sincere and vocal appreciation for their help brighten their day and make them feel good about themselves, as human beings?

Unless people feel like they have something specific and positive to gain by helping you, you'll find that they are unlikely to truly stick their neck out and provide quality assistance in your re-employment campaign. They'll brush you off, instead, with a few empty phrases or casual words of encouragement. This may seem cynical, but it's basic human nature. We all keep score in relationships and play favorites to some degree. If you disagree, just ask yourself whether you would recommend every one of your close friends and family members for a job working in your current company—or the place where you most recently worked. Would you provide these referrals on a unilateral basis? Or would you be somewhat selective, depending on your perception of each person's work ethic, professionalism, and attitude?

I certainly can't rule out that there may be people out there who will always provide help, to the greatest degree possible, to anybody they know who asks for it. In general, however, I've found that most people gauge their assistance carefully and offer direct referrals only after weighing out how such an endorsement will help or hurt their own reputation.

Therefore, if you plan on asking people to call a few friends and acquaintances on your behalf, it's important that you recognize the question that will be running through their head: "is this person a winner and will they make me look good to the people to whom they're asking me to refer them to?" If the answer is negative, your request will likely get shunted aside with the familiar "eyes and ears" refrain or one of a thousand variations. If you start to get this type of response on a regular basis, in fact, it's a pretty clear sign that you've started your networking efforts prematurely. You need to study the networking process more carefully and think hard about what might *motivate* the people you know to go the extra mile in helping you out with your search.

If you keep bulldozing ahead, on the other hand, and don't stop to think about the impressions you are sending out, you're likely to alienate a few of your top contacts before your job search is barely out of the gate!

So what, then, are the keys to building a winning professional image? What tips and techniques will help ensure that your network bends over backwards to help you out, rather

than crosses the street (literally and figuratively) when they see you coming? Here's a few of the most common tips that I share with my career coaching clients:

● **Know what you want.** Until you're relatively clear about your career direction, don't bother with the networking circuit. All you'll do is confuse people. It's nobody's job but your own to figure out what you want to be when you grow up, and few impressions are as dangerous as coming across to your network as "lost" or "confused" about your career path. You need to be able to tell people exactly what types of jobs you'd like to hold and what companies would be your best employment targets. If you are vague in describing the type of employment you're after, you'll inevitably find that the networking help you get back is almost uselessly vague, in return. So before reaching into your Rolodex of hard-earned relationships, take the time needed to sort out your career goals and get your message straight. This will save everybody concerned a great deal of time and aggravation in the long run.

● **Take responsibility for your own success.** Another common impression many networkers send out, often unconsciously, is the perception that they are lazy or looking for a free lunch. As we all know, there are certain deities in the universe who tend to "help those who help themselves"—and believe it or not, most of your networking contacts feel the same way! They will be far more inclined to support a job seeker who appears to be demonstrating personal accountability for their own success. So don't network until you've got some of your own "sweat equity" invested in the process and a clear plan of action about how you are going to pursue your goals. As you connect with people, you can then make sure they know you're aggressively working your own plan and that you're not expecting them, or anybody else, to bail you out. The result? You'll be amazed at how many people jump on the bandwagon of your career transition effort once they realize you're not asking them to sit in the driver's seat.

● **Exude professionalism.** While times change and the business world seems to be growing increasingly casual these days, resist the urge to join the party. When networking, demonstrate consummate professionalism at all times and exhibit every good old-fashioned quality associated with business success. Dress up, not down, when meeting with people. Begin every networking conversation with a statement of appreciation for the person's time and end every discussion with an expression of gratitude for their assistance. Send out thank-you cards and offer to return favors. Come prepared with an agenda to every meeting and stick to the agreed-upon time limit. While these stringent standards may seem like overkill in today's business-casual world, they will do wonders for building your professional image and reputation,

and will help you reap an exponentially greater amount of useful assistance as a result.

In the end, there's no question that professional networking is the consummate tool for achieving career success. Top executives know this, and that's why they don't spend day after day on the golf course simply to indulge themselves in the sport itself; they use these types of social events to gain visibility, enhance their sphere of influence, and build the relationships that will strengthen their careers for years to come. But it's also important to recognize that the act of networking alone is no guarantee of results. If you rush the process, without adequate planning and preparation, you can end up undoing years of carefully-built relationships—and extend your job search months longer than it needs to be.

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