A Guide to Professional Networking

Rivier UNIVERSITY

More people obtain jobs by networking than using conventional job search methods. Talk to anyone and everyone regarding job contacts and vacancies. Ask employees and administrators where you have interned, volunteered, or worked, about job openings in their organizations. On a blank sheet of paper, list all the people you know, whether or not they are familiar with your chosen work field(s)/work setting(s) of interest. These primary contacts (people you know) do not need to know about specific job openings. Instead, think of them as information sources and as part of your communication network.

This list could include:

- Relatives and friends
- Co-workers and bosses (past and present)
- Neighbors
- School acquaintances – these could include your (or your children's) teachers, counselors, and administrators
- Religious leaders or fellow members of your church
- College alumni
- Community members
- Physicians and other health care practitioners
- Accountant, attorney, banker, or insurance agent
- Hairdresser
- Mail delivery person
- Fellow members of your athletics team
- Trade/professional associations
- Connections through online professional networking sites like LinkedIn

This suggested list of potential primary contacts is not meant to be all inclusive. Use it as a starting point and see who else you can add to the list. After you have completed your contact list (your list will grow as you remember more and more contacts over time), add phone numbers and addresses to your list to facilitate follow-up with your contacts as needed.

Now What?

Ask your primary contacts if they can refer you to secondary contacts (people they know) with hiring power, valuable career information, and/or knowledge of job vacancies in your desired field. Here are some potential questions to ask:

- Do you know anyone who does the type of work that I am looking for (or work that is similar in nature to the type of work that I am looking for)?
- Do you know anyone who works in the industry (or industries) that I wish to explore?
- Do you know anyone who works in this type of work setting or with this specific employer?
- Would your contact(s) be willing to meet with me informally to answer a few questions?

The Networking Interview

Conduct informational networking interviews with professionals in fields of interest as a way to learn more about their job, educational background, career path to current position, industry pros and cons, and to obtain referrals that broaden your networking base.

- Who you are:
  "Hello, Mr. Smith. My name is _____."
- How did you get here:
  "…and I am calling at the suggestion of George Turner…."
- Why are you here:
  "…the reason I am calling is that I am currently exploring new opportunities in the field of _____. I want you to know that George did not imply that you have any openings or that you would know of any. He did say that you would be a good person to speak with in order to gain a better perspective on my options within the marketplace."

The introduction above can be used in telephoning the contact person for an interview. If you meet with some resistance, stress that you won't take up much of his/her time and that you are willing to meet at his/her convenience.

Introduction to the Networking Interview

The goal of the above introduction is to obtain a firm date and time for the networking interview. The actual interview can begin with a review of the introduction as a reminder of how and why you are there. A guide for the remainder of the interview goes as follows:

Tell the Contact About Yourself

Briefly summarize (approximately one minute worth) your background and the functional skills you possess utilizing your resume as a guideline.

Next, ask if there is anything the contact person would like you to elaborate on. (The response to this question may provide a clue as to an area of your background, which is of special interest to the contact person. It could well be that repeated questions of this nature could lead to an opportunity for you right here in the contact person's organization!) Provide as much detail as is requested and be sure to follow-up by asking if there is any special reason for the interest expressed. If the contact person is not interested in a specific aspect of your background, proceed with a more general and somewhat more detailed explanation of your experiences. Be sure to note where your experience was obtained as well as job titles and responsibilities. Pay special attention here to signs of disinterest. Do not elaborate without end since this could prove counterproductive. Pause occasionally for questions.

Get to Know the Contact Person/Organization

Now it's time to ask the contact person any questions you have. Remember, although this individual may or may not have a position currently available, you want to determine your level of interest in this organization as a future potential employer. Find out about the contact's background, the extent of decision-making ability regarding new hires, the challenges currently faced by him/her or the department/organization as well as any other things you would like to know about this organization. Show interest in this contact as a real person.

Show the Contact You Have Listened

Once you've become familiar with the challenges and concerns faced by the contact person, it's time to demonstrate how the skills which you possess relate to these challenges and concerns.

Professional Example:

"An experience of mine at XYZ Organization reminds me of the situation you just described. I handled that incident by… As a result, the department experienced a better…"

The Finishing Touches

If there were any possible opportunities brewing in this organization, you would know it by now. If no mention is made of a possible match, tell the contact that you enjoyed meeting with him/her and that you'll be sure to tell the referral about your meeting. Also, ask if the contact knows of others with whom you might meet, so as to continue your exploration.

Questions to Ask

About the Industry

- How is the industry changing?
- Where do you see growth happening?

About the Company

- What kind of customers/clients does the company serve?
- Who are the primary competitors to this company?
- Can you provide me with an idea on the organizational chart for your area?
- How would you describe the organizational culture?
- Has technology changed how business is done?

About the job

- What are your duties and responsibilities?
- What challenges are currently faced by you/your department/the organization/the industry?
- What do you see as the nature of the job market in this field?
- What are the advancement or growth opportunities?
- What is the profile of a high achiever in this job?
- Where would you see someone with my kind of background fitting into this type of environment?

About the networking contact

- How did you come to work in this field/industry/position?
- What career path did you take to get to where you are?
- What advice would you give to someone wanting to break into this field?
- What do you like best about your job?
- What do you like least about your job?
- Can you refer me to anyone else whom I might speak with so as to continue my research?

Example Thank You Letter Format

Your Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Date

Contact Name
Title and/or Department
Company Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Mr./Ms. _____,

I am writing to let you know how much I enjoyed meeting with you on Thursday and learning more about the field of _____. Through our discussion, I now have a much clearer understanding of the options open to me within my area of concentration at Rivier University.

Many thanks for your time. I realize that your time is valuable, and I appreciate your willingness to share your knowledge and experience with me.

Sincerely,

Your Signature

Your Full Name